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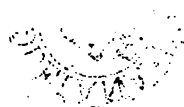
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ST ELSHA

IE, M.A.





THE HISTORY
OF THE
PROPHET ELISHA.

BY
W. P. DOTHIE, M.A.



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PREFACE.

THIS book is published in the hope chiefly of finding readers among personal friends ; for although the subject it treats of affects questions of general and of growing interest, there is a dearth of books about Elisha, which, if the demand creates the supply, does not augur well for the reception of this one. It consists of half-a-dozen Sunday evening sermons, which have been re-written for the press with only a few additions and omissions that seemed fitting when what were originally sermons were to take the shape of chapters or essays. Notwithstanding the plethora of published sermons, which is now such as to give an air of absurdity to the present humble experiment, the writer has a conviction that something remains to be done for the due vindication or elucidation of many of the miraculous narratives in the Old Testament. A little is attempted in that way in

the following pages. The method pursued has no claim whatever to originality; for it is the one that is increasingly followed now-a-days, and the only one that avails anything against either the flippancy or the earnestness of those who think the Bible, as a standard of belief, has had its day. That method simply aims at presenting the perennial spiritual teaching of the miraculous narratives, in strict keeping at once with the facts as they are alleged and with the central truths of the great Book. We thus arrive at the rational or the anti-rationalistic sense.

The miracles of the New Testament have naturally attracted the attention of Christian expositors much more than those of the Old; while just the reverse may be said of the direction of the efforts of destructive criticism. Moreover, as is equally natural, the conscience and heart of the Church are not so sensitive to reproaches cast upon Judaism as to anything that would sully the bright renown of Christianity. There is a strong tendency to ignore the living oneness of the Jewish *and the Christian* Scriptures. For these rea-

sions, among others, a great part of the supernaturalism of the Old Testament has but a shaky hold upon the faith of a large proportion of Christian people; and there are many who experience a sense of relief at the idea that the Old Testament miracles might be classified with Æsop's Fables without affecting the truth of the Apostles' Creed.

All this might be said with an emphasis of the history of the Prophet Elisha, which is little more than a collection of miracles. There is no other biography in the Bible which compresses into so little space so many miracles, excepting *the* biography in which all is miraculous. Elisha's personality, indeed, by no means ranks among those of the very highest interest in sacred history. Few and hazy are the glimpses that we get of the man himself; and it is as much beside the aim as it is beyond the ability of the writer to do for him what has been so ably and brilliantly done for Jezebel, and to invest him with a wholly imaginary charm. But as a worker of miracles, we may pronounce him second to none. It is, therefore, in this point of

view that his life becomes a valuable study. And as such, it touches some of the great theological questions which are emerging with fresh interest at the present time.

This little volume claims merely to be a careful and independent, though a very brief and slight, re-statement of its small part of the great argument tending to show how the Bible is throughout a consistent supernatural revelation of the supreme truth that God is love ; or, in other words, that Jesus Christ is God. May it help a little to increase in some who read it the precious faith that centres in this everlasting Gospel, and so becomes the source of all that is holiest and happiest in our lives !

RED HILL, SURREY,
August, 1872.



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THE HISTORY
OF
THE PROPHET ELISHA.

I.

THE MANTLE OF ELIJAH.

IN the familiar picture of the fiery prophet standing at the entrance of the cave in Mount Horeb, the chief point of interest is the introduction of the name of Elisha. A sublime and a vivid picture it is, of the second Moses, possibly in that same "clift of the rock," looking forth from his dark lodging in the mountain at the storm, and earthquake, and fire, which reflected the tumult and heat of his own heart ; and then listening to the still small voice till his perturbation was charmed away, and the gentleness of God possessed him, and a great calm succeeded the tempest. Now he could welcome the news which a little while before would have aggravated him, that there were thousands in Israel as faithful as himself, and that from amongst them, his successor was al-

ready chosen. "Elisha shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room."

It had needed supernatural strength to bring him hither; weighted as he was with "the peddling creature we so wrongly call self." But we see him now lightened of that unusual encumbrance—a spiritual force, a man full of God—retracing the steps of his wondrous journey across the desert of Sinai, back to Beersheba, and so northward back to the land of Israel. His long journey at last brings him to Abel-meholah (meadow of dancing), associated with Gideon's lamps, pitchers, and trumpets, not yet known as the birthplace of a great man. Elijah's business lies here. He will not be long in doing it. He spies men ploughing in the field yonder. There are twelve yoke of oxen at work; and the master himself is driving the last. The old prophet walks past him; and in passing, casts his mantle upon him. The young farmer knows the symbolic language, though not a word has been uttered; and he runs after the old man to say—for his mind is already made up—"Yes, let me take leave of my father and mother, and follow thee." "Go," says the unearthly-looking old man, "but return soon; for it is a great thing that I do to thee." Whereupon Elisha, the son of Shaphat, hastens home; calls his astonished people to a feast, and then bids them all farewell. He has given up farming, and *is gone after Elijah*, to "minister unto him."

Our first glimpse of the man is a thing to be remembered—Elisha *ploughing* the soil of Israel. He was called from one kind of hard work to another; and if he had learnt the art of living laborious days in following the plough and in managing the farm, it was just the accomplishment to fit him for succeeding Elijah. He was to enter into those labours which had required all the tremendous energy of his predecessor. A nation hardened as Israel was in those bad days, wanted -ploughing of a more strenuous kind than any fallow which the young farmer had dealt with yet. Hard work, with a distant harvest. Not much reaping was to reward him during his long life-time. One thinks of the dreary centuries that followed: the miserable relapses of Israel, the long captivities, the state of Samaria when Jesus travelled through it: and the toils of those mighty men of old seem to have been altogether preparatory to a new state of things which was then remotely future. The fields are "white to harvest" now; but then it was all ploughing.

We may thus see that the lower calling of our prophet was a training for the higher, according to the divine rule of education, a rule without exception. Not always is the lower calling a *picture* of the higher—as with Elisha, the ploughman; as with Moses and David, the shepherds; as with the Galilean fishermen, afterwards fishers of men; but always the humbler work is a *preparation* for the

higher. God's beginnings are always obscure, like the underground preparation that issues in the rose or the grape, like the life of Jesus at Nazareth. And the likelihood of our promotion to higher work and reward always turns on our fidelity in the duty that lies nearest. Every morning brings from the Great Taskmaster work wanting to be done at once. Never mind what it is. The Lord hath need of thee for that purpose to-day. Set to work with thy plough, or hammer, or needle, or broom; and whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might. Thou good servant! thy talents will increase, thy wages will multiply; until there come at last "a sound of glory ringing in thine ears," like what Christ foretold: "Because thou hast been faithful in a very little, have thou authority over ten cities."

Elisha following the plough, is a suggestive sight; but Elisha quitting the plough, is a stroke of heroism which, after these thousands of years, we may still pause at with a hope of catching from it some sparks of inspiration. It seems a grand action, whether looked at on the negative or on the positive side. All the elements of man's chief difficulty, which is decision, were crowded into that moment. The question of parting with *property* was one of them—*landed* property—of all kinds the most adhesive, to which the soul of man generally cleaves even closer than to gold. Those twelve *yoke of oxen* give a prosperous look to the paternal

estate, of which he was at least the prospective owner. And who shall say what ties of the heart bound him to the old home at Abel-meholah? Perhaps a cutting of heart-strings was needful beyond what the historian has hinted. In addition to which, we may safely affirm that *comfort* and *routine*, those cherished but often fatal friends of man, pulled with all their might the wrong way. And if the strong manhood of Elisha could easily snap all such chains, was it a light matter to commit himself to a vocation like Elijah's own? There was a wondrous courage in his decision. Yes, across this Atlantic ocean of time we can feel the electric thrill of his high resolve. We can feel the beating of his heart, and something of the mighty joy and the great peace of God which filled him when the moment of decision was past.

Easy to envy it; but to emulate it and to get ourselves initiated into the divine secret? Well, that also is easy. Decision is, to flesh and blood, the one difficulty of a human life. But a man is more than flesh and blood. There is a spirit in him which needs only assert itself, and its royalty is confessed. Strong is that spirit, when it has faith, and yields to the will of God. Then the man says: "I will, not as I wish, but as Thou wilt;" and the very strength of God begins working in him, both to will and to do. Elisha's decision, so lightning-like in its rapidity and effect, was an inspiration. Shall we say then, We cannot pro-

pose it to ourselves for an example? Nay, if it were not an inspiration of the eternal God who is with us, if it were the effect merely of Elisha's own decisiveness of nature, it might mean little or nothing for us. But being the result of a higher energy than his own, which wrought through his faith, it remains for us an exemplary and a precious thing, the like of which is within the sphere of our own capacity. For faith, although the condition of all noble action, is itself not so much active as passive; and in believing God a man simply admits into himself a power infinitely superior to his own, a strength which is perfect in weakness. And such faith is the one thing which we are all indefinitely capable of. Hence it is that the performances of faith, unlike those of genius, are universally interesting. We can all imitate them; and there is no difficulty to him that believeth.

Thus Elisha, seeing the mantle cast upon him, promptly answers to the sacred call. His heart instantly says, "Yes, I will come. I am ready." He confers not with flesh and blood. He does not hesitate for one minute about sacrificing his property or turning his face right away from all his pleasant earthly prospects. He does not think of asking his parents to consent. He does not quail at the formidable work before him. "Let me, I pray thee, kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow thee."

There is more than promptitude in his decision,

there is joy. That farewell feast which he gave to his people is a finely suggestive scene. We see the prosperous man, with youth, health, wealth, everything to make him contented and envied, and yet on the point of sacrificing all; exchanging a comfortable home and a flourishing business for the unearthly calling of a prophet, at the time when Jezebel was queen of Israel; and, instead of putting a sorrowful face upon it, summoning all his friends around him, and feasting them in honour of the happy event. They shall see what his resolution is, for he uses the very instruments of his former employment as fuel in preparing their food. They shall see that he is glad, that he reckons himself no loser by the sacrifice, but a great gainer; like the Apostle Paul afterwards; like every one who has made a sacrifice for God. Right glad he was, while some of his old friends were perhaps pitying him. And all this the result of one mysterious mighty call, just because Elijah had silently cast his mantle upon him. Ah, what power there is in God's voice when it speaks into your heart! Then you can forsake all and follow Christ; and you find your loss your gain.

Let us beware of narrow applications of the lesson. This is the spirit in which a young man should resolve to be a missionary to the heathen. But this is equally the spirit in which every man and every woman should resolve to give up all for Christ. There may be no thought or chance of

going to Madagascar or to China, or of making any great outward sacrifice. But to withdraw the heart from gold, from earthly ambitions and amusements and attachments, from idols of all sorts, that it may be free to love God and do good,—this is a task which affords infinite scope for the same spirit of sacrifice; and this is a task for which every human life presents an opportunity.

Several years pass, during which Elisha goes about with his master in the doubly subordinate character of a learner and a servant. An apprenticeship pregnant with effects on him and his more independent ministry in after years, we are sure; although the history throws no ray of light on him at any moment of the period, except at the beginning and the end of it. We may figure it as the time of his professional training. A rare and wondrous education it must have been. From the day when the great prophet's mantle touched him to the day when it was transferred to him, he must have been growing in spiritual stature. Only it is to be noted, that by far the strongest formative circumstance in his training is the personality of Elijah. It by no means follows as a matter of course that he resembles Elijah; but it will not surprise us if he turn out a striking likeness of his great spiritual father, and his life a second edition or continuation of the one going before, an after-wave of the original impulse. *And so we shall find it.* The second prophet

is like the first. There is no contrast between them, except in the point of originality on one side and versatility on the other. We conceive him to have been related to Elijah as the moon (according to the poet) is to the earth :

“ Drinking from thy sense and sight
Beauty, majesty, and might.”

It is merely fanciful to institute any contrast between the two prophets on the New Testament ground of meekness, mildness, and mercifulness; as if the one had no more human feeling in him than a flash of lightning, or as if the other were the apostle of patient endurance. Altogether misleading! Both of them had the same divine idea given them to utter in the same stern accents. And if the former was a second Moses, the latter was a second Elijah.

Elisha's history, inseparable from his master's, was throughout consecutive and subordinate to it. But this does not lessen its worth. Good disciples are wanted as much as great masters, and perhaps more. There is far more of the ivy than of the oak in the generality of mankind. For one whose business it is to strike out a new path, there is a host whose business it is to follow him in it. We have great masters enough, nay, the Master Himself. Good disciples are the thing that is wanted in more plenty. Let Elisha teach us, then, as a model disciple. Why did not Gehazi become a second Elisha? It was not in him; and so we see

the one grain of truth there is in the sarcasm about "man-made" or "college-made" ministers. The students must have grace in themselves, to be capable of anything. For the rest, the poor toothless sarcasm ought, at this time of day, to abate no one's ardour in the cause of collegiate progress, much less frighten any friends of the cause to the side of the Philistines. The worthy training of religious teachers is a question which promises to grow before long into the very greatest of ecclesiastical problems. And the culture and common-sense of the nineteenth century are scarcely more pronounced in favour of a prolonged professional education for ministers than are the scattered hints on the subject that we find in these old Hebrew books.

When Elisha makes his appearance the second time, we find that his heart has grown to his master's. It was a time to prove this; for it was the last day of their long friendship, as they both knew. The disciple had an extraordinary reason for clinging to his master now. If it had been merely to see him die, he might not have been so resolute to see the last of him. But he knew that Elijah was not going to die, but to leave the world in such a way that a grand seal would be set, at once on the end of the career that was closing and on the commencement of his own. Otherwise he might have yielded the point. Again and again Elijah entreated to be left alone. We cannot believe that he was pretending such anxiety, to test

his friend's affection. It was natural to that exalted spirit, from pure humility and delicacy, to wish that there should be no human witness of his glorification. It was a genuine feeling, not a piece of acting. But when the younger man assured him with a solemn oath that he would not leave him, they both went together to Bethel. There, where the children afterwards made sport of Elijah's translation, the scholars of the prophets came lamenting the dreaded loss of their master. The same thing is repeated at Jericho. There are dismal forebodings, bitter lamentations. What is to become of Jehovah's cause now? Down it will go, with the removal of the main prop. Still, as the two companions proceed on their strange journey, the old man tries at every stage to leave the other behind, but always without success. There is no shaking him off. He is a tenacious man.

They go therefore together toward the Jordan, while fifty of the scholars follow at a distance, anxious and curious what is to befall. If these collegians had lived in our times, with Bibles and all the other miraculous evidences of a completed revelation like ours, they would never have seen what they did now see, or else they could not have believed their own eyes. But let us put ourselves in their place, and we shall see a God-like fitness in the miracle which they beheld. Their glorious leader is leaving them, but not like a warrior beaten off the field. Hard as the battle goes, in the very

brunt of it the captain himself leaves it like a conqueror. Courage and patience in the fight, then! Behold Elijah taking his mantle and rolling it together and smiting the water with it; at which the river divides,—the sacred river stays in its course to make a pathway for the servant of God. Those younger men will remember this, while they live. Especially for Elisha was it a pregnant sign. “Even thus will the Mighty One make thy way before thee.”

The picture is a pathetic one, of those two companions arrived at the last stage of their journey, with one miracle just behind them and another just in front, yet with human hearts beating in them, and the disciple clinging to his master, conscious of the awfulness of the work before him, and of the change which a few minutes, perhaps, would bring, when he would find himself left “to plough through the deep all alone.” We all know what it is to feel a dependence like this, and also to lose it. But we are strangely slow to learn the interpretation of the thing; and therefore from childhood even to old age God is drilling us in this the deepest lesson of our life, that we may gain by every such loss.

“God gives us love. Something to love
He lends us. But, when love is grown
To ripeness, that on which it throve
Drops off, and love is left alone.”

“Ask what I shall do for thee before I be taken away from thee.” Elisha took up this challenge

with a modesty for which he has not always had credit. "I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me." This does not mean, Let me be twice as great a man, or twice as good a man, as thyself. To say nothing of the immodesty of such a request, neither the fact that Elisha's miracles were greater than those of his predecessor, nor the fancy that an evangelical prophet was twice as great as a legal one, can cast any real doubt on Elijah's official and personal pre-eminence. But the terms and form of the request prove that what Elisha sought was, not twice as much of the spirit as Elijah possessed, but twice as much as the sons of the prophets possessed. We find in Deuteronomy a rule, that a man shall "give his firstborn son a double portion of all that he hath"; and that is the explanation of it. He was asking, at that critical moment, for something to authenticate his high calling. The request was at once modest and beautifully suitable.

The answer was, "Thou hast asked a hard thing;" because it was impossible for Elijah to give it. He could speak with no such authority as the Great Intercessor, who says, "Ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you." And accordingly he makes it contingent on the Divine disposal. "If thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so."

But Elisha's importunity was rewarded. In the

midst of their conversation, those two friends were separated, as friends never were before or since. The one is rapt away into the heavens in a fiery chariot with fiery steeds amid a fiery tempest.* So the fiery prophet leaves the world. So ends the ministry of the representative of God's severity, the life which has been called "a volcanic tract in sacred history." The other stands gazing with upturned wondering eyes. Sorrow and joy are in the tones of his voice, while he cries: "My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof:" sorrow at the thought of seeing him no more; joy at seeing the sign of the fiery chariot. He knows now that he is to succeed Elijah, not in mere title and office, but in the strength of the living God. He too will prophesy, not in word only, but in demonstration of the Spirit and in power. He will let men know that there is a living God, pure, sin-hating, terrible to evil doers, merciful to them that put their trust in Him. He inherits the mantle of Elijah, not as a relic of the past, but as a sign of the future. His care is, to be a real successor of the mighty man of God, not to be clothed with the dignity of the post of chief prophet, but to carry on the work with power. To inherit a prophet's mantle or an apostle's authority, without inheriting the spirit of such noble ancestry, is it not less than nothing,

* See p. 73, on the question of the objective reality of such visions.

and vanity? A man may feel a generous pride in the thought of being the son of a noble father; but if he only inherits the noble name and position, without the character and without the virtue,—is an ass the better or the worse for being dressed in the skin of a lion? If we inherit the noblest of all names, if we profess and call ourselves Christians, how does it comport with the spirit of our life? To carry it worthily, what honour! But unworthily, what shame!

Our last thought is of the unchangeable Christ Himself. In those times to which the history of Elisha carries us back, there was a constant succession of official persons,—prophets, priests, kings,—who were more or less conspicuously leaders of the people, and who “seemed to be pillars.” Well, the great good man was removed; but lo, in the room of Elijah, an Elisha as good as he! Thus the very succession of faithful lives which the Bible so vividly presents deepens our feeling of the eternity of Christ. They, alike in appearing and in disappearing, tell us of the Eternal One who sends all prophets into this world that they may bear witness unto Himself. So that we can bid a thankful good-bye to each departing Elijah, while we welcome each Elisha newly entering upon his work. Christ neither comes nor goes, but abideth for ever: the manifestation of the Father, the sin-atoning Son of God, the quickening Spirit. “To Him give all the prophets witness.”

II.

THE SCHOOLS OF THE PROPHETS.

THROUGHOUT the middle period of Jewish history, from the time of Samuel to that of Ezra, we meet with traces of an institution which played a leading part in producing that unique national life amid which, and through which, the Christ revealed Himself to mankind. Those Pharisees and Sadducees, those rabbis and lawyers and scribes,—whose faces are so well known to us in the Gospels, and without whom we should not have known Christ half so well,—were the final product of the system. For many centuries it existed in the form of colleges, which were called in the later period *assemblies of the wise*, and in the earlier period *schools of the prophets*.

In the dimness that has fallen upon this long-defunct institution, we can still discern three things that are worth noting.

First, it was intensely theological. And its history, in this point of view, remains a matchless illustration both of the false and of the true method in theology. Not even the hair-splitting schoolmen or the punctilious ritualists of the middle ages excelled those doctors of the Talmud and the Targums, who taught that it was contrary

to the law of Moses to catch a flea on the Sabbath-day ; " making the law of God of none account through your traditions ; and many other such-like things ye do." This comes of departing from the plain common sense of Scripture, and refining on the letter of it. And from our present corner of observation we may echo the lament which is echoing from almost all corners, that so divine a thing as theology should have been so much mixed up with web-spinning, with logic-chopping, and, worst of all, with spite. But we may also echo the hope that we are passing speedily to happier times. It has been abundantly shown how strong a tendency there is in theology to turn sour without plenty of charity to keep it sweet. It seems now to be a fast-spreading idea, that theology is itself the soul of charity. And it is no new assertion to hazard, that this idea is the soul of the Bible. " God is love." Now the ancient schools of the prophets were founded on the principle of studying and expounding the word of God. Theology was understood in its grand sense of God speaking to men through men. That which was *spoken*, in so many different ways, was also *written*. It was in the hands of those students that the Bible became what it is ; and so much of it as they at any time possessed, it was their one task to understand and expound. What a healthy sign of our times it is, that hand-in-hand with such a revival as we see of missionary zeal, and of the aggressiveness of

Christianity, there should be seen such a general disposition to know more of the Bible and, in fact, to return to the method of the prophets and of Christ! In proportion as the free study of Scripture supplants the worship of dead dogmas and phrases, there must be less of that most foul and unnatural dislike of theology which has tainted the atmosphere, not only of the world, but of the Church.

Second: its tendency was to counteract ritualism. For although it is probable that most of the scholars were selected from the Levitical and priestly classes, the schools must have diffused a good deal of mental activity amongst all classes of the people. One sign of this we see in the Hebrew literature, which we must regard as very rich when we think of the antiquity, smallness, and isolation of the country in which it was produced. Another thing pointing in the same direction, is the fact that this institution brought such a vast number of trained and active minds into contact with the people generally. It is true that elementary secular instruction was no part of its design. The object was to raise religious teachers and to rouse religious feelings; but it went far to make the Jews, as they were in all likelihood, the best educated nation of antiquity. And so far as it caused this, it must have supplied a powerful counteraction to priestcraft. The reverse process, *that, namely*, of a professedly secular or literary

education, is ensuring the same result in England. Right or wrong, the School-board method has fastened itself on the country, and, be it for better or for worse, the sectarian method is doomed. The infant Hercules will strangle "Denominationalism," whether it be a serpent or an angel. The nation is following the lead of those "hard and dry secular educationalists," though not without ample warning of the catastrophe whither it is being hurried. The following prophetic utterances have lately resounded throughout England *ex cathedrâ*: "If the formal teaching of religion be disallowed in the day-schools, the nation will soon become atheist." "If the Athanasian Creed be touched, the Catholic Church will fall to pieces." "If the bishops be turned out of the House of Lords, the Monarchy, the House of Commons, and our English liberties, will soon be swept away." But amid all this dust, superstition would seem to be the only thing that is really in danger. One thing is clear, the schoolmaster has now got such a start of the priest, that the race is practically won.

Third: the schools of the prophets were an *adaptable* institution; their functions changed with the times. In the later centuries of the long Jewish history, they grew far more speculative and less practical than in those earlier centuries to which our present history belongs. Take the two most illustrious representatives of the two periods,

Isaiah and Elijah ; and you see the man of *words* and the man of *deeds*. Words were a far mightier instrument in the era of the later prophets than in that of the earlier ones ; and prophetic thoughts, too, brightened and increased as the advent of the Glorious One drew nearer. Prediction was quite a minor function of the ancient prophets. Paradoxical as it may seem, those dark ages did not want revelation so much as revival. The seers were as yet looking backwards to Abraham and Moses more than forwards to Christ ; and their cry was, "The God of Moses and of Abraham is in the midst of you, doing wondrous things, as in the days of old." The revival of the old faith was the distinctive work of the prophets for centuries after the time of Samuel, the sagacious founder of the schools, and of the prophetic order ; and such pre-eminently was the work of Elijah and Elisha—men of heroic energy, not of opulent thought or eloquent speech.

* The following series of incidents will exhibit Elisha among the sons of the prophets.

His first miracle was a repetition of Elijah's last. Scarcely has the fiery chariot faded out of sight, and the group of men standing on the other side of the river are still wondering what has befallen their old leader, when a new miracle-worker calls attention to himself, and a new wonder forces their thoughts into a fresh channel. There is Elijah's companion—who had sworn not to leave him—

returning alone, retracing the steps which he has trodden in such high converse a little while since, and with the prophet's mantle in his hands. They see him coming alone ; and, absorbed as they have been in Elijah's mysterious removal, they cannot but suddenly transfer the whole of their attention to him, when they behold him standing on the opposite margin of the deep rapid river, and smiting the waters, just like the great master himself ; and then hear him exclaiming, "Where is Jehovah the God of Elijah, even He ?" *They* hear him. Will *the waters* hear him too ? Will the living God show Himself remaining, although Elijah is gone ? Yes, and the waters part hither and thither, just as before ; and a new prophet, full of the spirit and power of Jehovah, comes advancing towards them, not on the water, like Jesus Christ the Lord, but between the Sundered floods, along a miraculous path ; and when he rejoins them they feel that they have been troubling themselves with needless forebodings ; and, bowing down before this new representative of God, they hail him with a loud recognition, "The spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha." Here we see that strong instinct which is the fruitful parent of hero-worshippers. Men cannot do without a leader. They must cling to some one who is, or whom they believe to be, higher than themselves. Very often, the hero's glories are purely imaginary, and he *shines in light borrowed from his worshipper.* This

is an amiable weakness of human nature. It is a less innocent matter when the instinct is blind, not with love, but with conventionalism, and worships any image which the Nebuchadnezzar of society may set up. This is the mischief of the hero-worshipping propensity, that it runs to seed in gregariousness to such a frightful extent : flocks of sheep each following one of themselves. Sad perversion of the Divine idea ! The real use of great men is to enfranchise, not enslave, mankind. They are to remind us that "we can make our lives sublime." They are to lift us toward their own level, and help us to see God. "And he that is feeble shall be as David ; and the house of David shall be as God, as the angel of the Lord before them." This is the true ring of that recognition, "The spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha." "The king is dead, long live the king !"

But what is really become of Elijah ? Have they seen the last of him ? Once, if not more than once, before, he had vanished very mysteriously ; and the king had hunted and scoured for him in all directions and in all corners, but he was nowhere to be found. Obadiah (1 Kings xviii. 12) seems to have imagined that he was supernaturally carried about, as Philip (Acts viii.) was transported away from the eunuch. We have no record of such a thing happening to Elijah ; but we read of *his* miraculous flight before Ahab's chariot, and of *his* miraculous walk to Horeb. And all these

recollections may have excited in the minds of the scholars a fancy, that if the Spirit of the Lord had now caught him up, it might be to drop him on the earth again, "peradventure upon some mountain, or into some valley." Did they then disbelieve Elisha's wonderful recital? Did they suspect that the story of the fiery chariot and horses was a fancy or a fiction of his own? By no means. Only, what room for possibilities in a case like this! What scope for fancy to run wild! Evidently a vague idea haunted them, as was natural, that they might yet come upon Elijah, alive or dead. At least his dead body might have fallen somewhere on the earth, and might be demanding instant burial. Thus they, with blind vigilance, hurrying on a wrong scent, awake to the occasion, as they fancy, but fast asleep in fact to all the glory of the miracle. It was like the undefined feeling of certain disciples of another Master, seeking for another dead body, when the angel expostulated with them, "Why seek ye the living among the dead?" Alas! it is a customary thing, this will-o'-the-wisp hunting about in the world for what is in heaven; this rummaging among earthly things for the happiness for which we must look upward. We may remark that, in the multiform supernatural circumstances related in the Scriptures, people often seem to have acted more coolly and obtusely than we should have thought possible, accepting the *miracle as a matter of course*—like Balaam bandy-

ing words with his ass, instead of being dumb with astonishment—and altogether missing the Divine significance of the thing at the moment ; as if to show in a glaring light the strange facility with which man can ignore God, and miss the track of spiritual truth.

To Elisha the foolish enterprise was transparent enough, and he would have drawn them back from it. But finding them stubborn, he yields the point, and so gains the point. The new master might have insisted on having his own way, and have created an uncomfortable suspicion that he was jealous of a great rival and loath to part with the mantle now it had come into his hands ; whereas, by letting them go on that fool's errand when they were so resolved on it, he ensured that they should come back wiser men. It is a great thing to know when to resist. It is a still greater to know when to yield. "And when they came again to him, he said unto them, Did I not say unto you, Go not?"

Soon after this affair the people of Jericho made an application to him which proved that he was getting recognised, and gave him an opportunity of establishing himself still further in their confidence. Jericho was one of the most beautiful of towns ; but the water, to which the plain owed all its fertility, and the "situation of the city" all its pleasantness, was hurtful to health and life. The *men of the city* came and represented this to him.

"Bring me a *new* cruse," said he, "and put *salt* therein." According to recent travellers, the very same well is extant, with a rough remnant of stone wall, to which Elisha carried the cruse, and where he poured the salt into the spring, so that the water was healed. A memorable miracle, and full of meaning at every point! Man lives in a beautiful world, where everything is embittered and blighted by one thing, which, were there nothing to counteract it, would make it a mere City of Destruction, a mere Tantalus-world, or Hell. But for this there is a remedy,—one only, but a sovereign one,—the principle of incorruptibility and of life conquering death in the person of Jesus Christ. This is the salt in the new cruse; and with this you must go to the spring, the fountain-head, the heart of man. Put the salt into the running stream. Tell him to Christianize his habits. Of what use is it, when the spring still sends forth bitterness and death? "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again." Beautifully this miracle suggests what the Bible everywhere so loudly insists upon—the necessity of thoroughness in dealing with the spiritual disease of man, and the fact that God does deal with it thoroughly, putting into him a principle of life that is entirely new and divinely strong. And it is not unlikely that this miracle was as good as a theological treatise for the sons of the prophets.

Between the city of palm-trees and the river,

there stood in those days the village or little town of Gilgal, not unknown to sacred history, although time has worn away every vestige of it. Somewhat more than half-way from the river to the city it seems to have stood, and in the route of that first march of the Israelites into the land of promise. Gilgal was their first resting-place, and was their head-quarters for a long time. It was here that they set up the twelve stones which they had brought from the bed of the Jordan, from the spot where "the priests' feet stood firm on dry ground" (Josh. iv. 19). Samuel visited this place on circuit once a year; and it is likely the school of the prophets at Gilgal owed its formation to him. We find Elisha in this neighbourhood during a famine. It is a good while since the healing of the waters of Jericho. He has done wonderful things in the meantime. Now he arrives at the college at Gilgal, and we see him with the scholars around him, the most obvious thing in whose condition is, that they are very hungry. "There is a dearth in the land," whose pinching grip is felt in the dining-hall of this poor college as well as in the cottages around. Notwithstanding, the master will put a good face upon it; and our dinner shall not lack in quantity, if in quality. There is rather a hearty sound in Elisha's instructions to his man: "Set on the great pot, and seethe pottage for the sons of the prophets." Thereupon one of this hungry brother-

hood, with more zeal than discretion, and more mindful of quantity than of quality, runs out into the field, gathers a heap of poisonous herbage, and bringing it home in his garment, shreds it into the pot without any suspicion of its deadly nature. The brethren, sitting down with a good appetite to their repast, are soon seized with a panic. Frightened at the extremely bitter taste of the mess, they cry out, "O thou man of God, there is death in the pot." The master took some meal and threw it in; and when they again tasted it at his bidding, they found that both its nauseous and its noxious quality had been taken away. "And there was nothing evil in the pot." So, after all, they had a wholesome and a savoury dinner. This miracle has the same general significance as that of the healing of the pestiferous water. Both belong to the same class with nearly all the Saviour's miracles, illustrating the health-giving grace of God. But we may particularly note in this instance the *instrumental* use of the meal, as previously of the salt. If the thing was miraculous at all, the use of such means would not abate one jot of its miraculousness. And this use of a fit instrument or medium, which is characteristic of miracles, is equally noticeable in the ordinary acts of God, and ought not to veil but to reveal His hand. He could keep us alive without the instrumentality of our daily food; but He has made our life dependent upon

that, and we are to remember that *He* has made it so, and that we do not live by bread alone. To forget God's agency in sustaining our life by means of what we eat and drink, would be on a par with imagining that the meal which Elisha cast into the pot, or the salt which he cast into the spring, could heal the mischief without any operation of the power of God.

During the same famine, a man arrived at Gilgal with a present for Elisha. Twenty small barley-loaves he brings as first-fruits, together with some flour (Numb. xviii. 13; Deut. xviii. 4). A pious offering, and a sign of the existence of some true Israelites at Baal-shalisha, whence the man came. And a welcome present indeed when famine was multiplying the worth of everything eatable; but still not much for a hundred hungry men. A faint prophetic picture comes forth now, in the old history, of that open-air feast immortalized in each of the four gospels, when thousands were fed from the hands of Jesus, with fewer than twenty loaves! "And he said, Give unto the people, that they may eat. And his servitor said, What, should I set this before a hundred men? He said again, Give the people that they may eat: for thus saith the Lord, they shall eat, and shall leave thereof. So he set it before them, and they did eat, and left thereof, according to the word of the Lord."

We remark at this point that Elisha's miracles

were meant for signs of the presence of the mighty God in Israel far more transparently than they were meant for signs of his own truthfulness or authority. His first miracle indeed pointed principally to the fact that he was himself a teacher sent from God. When he divided the river Jordan, the intent obviously was to inspire confidence in himself as the man accredited from heaven to fill the place of Elijah. But afterwards his own personality falls into the background, as will appear in a moment if we contrast him with Moses or with Jesus. The definite purpose of the two miracles we have just been reviewing, was to stimulate the faith of the scholars in the revelations given to the fathers; to show them that, in those dark distressful times, Jehovah cared for His people as much as ever; to impress upon them that, as in the grandest moments in the lives of Abraham and of Moses, so now, the living God was near. As I said before, Elisha's business was, not to create a new creed, but to revive an old one.

But these tales of wonder, so homely and yet so beautiful, are exactly like all the supernatural stories of the Bible in their *perennial* meaning. For they all have a perennial meaning, and are full of lessons for to-day. As God *was*, at any sublime, heart-stirring, miraculous moment, let us consider, so He *is* always. To feel this, makes of our life one miracle, and makes the whole of

this complex world, instead of a machine whirling with noise and with dust, an expression of God's thoughts to our hearts, full of tenderness and of beauty everywhere. Grand and solemn, merciful and helpful, looks forth upon us the face of heaven and earth, in the light of the miracles of Christ and of His forerunners and followers, because they show us the Father. They are a multitude of rays which concentrate their light on the personality of God, which come to a focus in the words, "Our Father." They are a mighty chorus of voices that have been heard from heaven at sundry times, and are now all blended in the Bible, uttering the Fatherhood of God. Mighty music blending again with earth's thousand voices, all repeating the name of the Father. Thus we find the practical interpretation of miracles in the first sentence of the Lord's prayer. Little children want a father, but not more than men and women do, *Pater noster!* There we have the essential extract of miracles.

But now, in tracing Elisha's doings among the sons of the prophets, we come lastly upon a miracle which does not wear a dignified appearance, and which probably strikes many as beneath the dignity of a miracle, and therefore hard of belief. Let us see if there be not a meaning worthy of its place in sacred history in the story of the floating axe-head.

The college in a certain district having out-

grown its accommodation, it is resolved that a new building be erected.

Here is a glimpse of the progress of the schools under Elisha's management. The times were hard and, what was worse, profligate, rude, coarse, heathenish; but it boded some good that this institution flourished; and Elisha, who was no doubt the mainspring of the movement, showed himself at once a far-seeing and a disinterested man by throwing himself so heartily into this work. Like Moses, he was incapable of jealousy in such a matter. "Enviest thou for my sake? would God that all the Lord's people were prophets!"

We also get some light here upon the industrious and unconventional habits of these sons of the prophets. They were theological students, and a professional and learned order; but handicraftsmen as well, and able and ready to turn their hands to any and every useful employment that offered itself. A new college-building is wanted; and forthwith they all turn out and set about building it for themselves; and they do the whole work, including the cutting of the necessary timber. It is a picturesque spectacle that we see on the woody bank of the Jordan: the collegians hard at work felling trees, and Elisha himself busy on the spot. A hard-working set of men, those men of God, as all men of God must be,

Another thing that strikes us is the poverty of the scholars. Poor men they were, as well as picked men, or there could hardly have been so much ado about the loss of an axe-head. The Jordan, between the sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea, and especially near Jericho, is a deep river with a rapid stream and muddy waters. One of the scholars was felling a beam, and while he was driving hard with his axe, the iron got loose from the handle and dropped into the river. He grieves over it as if he had lost a fortune. It was a gift; and the point of his grief was, that he had lost a precious thing which there was no replacing. He must now stand aloof from his delightful work. The friendly master was at hand. He saw the accident, and sympathising with the eager workman, he felt that it was not a too trivial occasion for the miraculous help of the Great Master-Builder. So he cut down a stick, and cast it in thither, and the iron swam to the surface, and the precious tool was recovered.

Smallest of miracles, and for that reason particularly interesting. At least it was done at the bidding of a hearty kindness; and it answered the purpose of showing God's gracious presence with His diligent servants as well as a much grander one would have done. Besides this, it showed them that God was not above interesting Himself in small affairs, and interposing with *His friendly hand* in common-place difficulties.

One miracle differeth from another miracle in glory, as one star from another star, and indeed as a star from a flower. But the same Hand that paints the midnight heavens with all that starry magnificence, paints the meadows with daisies and buttercups. And all alike, the great and the small, prophesy of Him; and if we see God in the grand miracles, why should we not see Him in the little ones? Is not this miracle beautiful in its very humbleness? We more easily believe in God's helping us in great things than in little things. But it is true that He does help us in little things, if we are bent on serving Him; and the best faith is that which grasps God's friendship and help in ordinary circumstances, which applies His promises to the practical details of every day, which produces a robust religion able to live in the world, not a superfine exotic that can only flourish in the conservatory of the sanctuary. That is the best faith which is as lively and active on Monday as on Sunday, and expects to find God as much in going to business as in going to church. It is quite true, that if we drop an axe-head into the water it won't swim; but it is equally true, that the almighty God who once, in response to Elisha's faith, gave such a singular proof of His helpful presence with His servants, does help us in our daily round according to our faith, and that we find it immensely profitable to seek His help, lifting our hearts to Him in everything that we do.

In leaving this section of Elisha's history, let us carry with us the thought that the world is God's great school, in which every one of us has an opportunity of learning Divine wisdom, of being trained for "the life beyond life;" and the first lesson and the last is to take upon us the yoke of Christ—that yoke of the Cross so stern to all who resist it, so easy and delightful to all who wear it; receiving with humility and meekness the forgiveness of our sins, and all the growing blessedness of God's accepting love and approving smile, through the atonement of Jesus. Either this, with a thrice blissful welcome into heaven, or the blank wretchedness of meeting the sorrowful frown of our Judge. Be it our only ambition to be scholars of the Great Master, who says, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls."

III.

THE WOMEN OF ISRAEL.

THE likeness of Elisha's miracles to those of our Lord will hardly satisfy us unless we keep some of them out of sight, for it is but a one-sided likeness ; and yet, on the amiable side, it assuredly is very striking. The stories of the cleansing of the leper, the multiplication of the oil and the loaves, and the restoration of the dead child, seem to antedate the Gospels almost a thousand years ; and, in reading them, we could fancy ourselves inhaling the breath and looking at the sights of that paradise which Jesus created around Himself. Of Elisha's personal disposition we know almost nothing, except that it was energetic and choleric. We can take leave to say this last thing when we think of Jonah, who was, by the way, not far from being a contemporary of his. Elisha, so far as we can make him out, was naturally on much happier terms with himself than the prophet who went to Nineveh ; and yet he strikes us as having had a good deal of the same Jewish fire in him. A propensity to anger was certainly not wanting. But this we know often coexists with kindness and even geniality of temperament ; and if any part of the fragmentary biography

before us favours the more sunny view of Elisha's character, it is that which we now enter upon.

Here he is brought into connection with two bereaved women of Israel. One of them was poor, the other was rich ; one had lost her husband, the other had lost her child. We shall see him comforting the one by giving her the lost means of livelihood ; and the other, by giving back the lost life itself. We come first to the story of

THE CRUSE OF OIL.

The members of the Jewish colleges did not all reside in college-buildings. In later times there were apartments in the temple and in many of the synagogues for the meetings of the lovers of wisdom ; and it is not quite certain that even the ancient buildings were anything more than places of assembly ; although it is probable that they were also places of residence. At any rate, some of the scholars were married and lived in private houses. Our history now takes us into one of these dwellings. A poor little cottage, we may picture it, of the Oriental type, which means a poorer house than one of the same class in England,—indoor comfort counting for less in the Syrian climate. In this cottage, or cabin, we find a poor woman, with her two sons, all in deep distress. The father is dead. He was a good man, one of the sons of the prophets, and he “did fear the Lord ;” but he has

died in debt,—rather deeply in debt for a man of his position,—perhaps after a long illness. Alas for the wife and the boys! for the creditor is urgent, and the consequences are worse than if they had been consigned to a modern workhouse.

English pauperism is a far huger problem than the law of Moses had to grapple with; and it cannot be denied that Christian legislation creates difficulties for itself in respecting the freedom of the poor. Slavery is a very convenient institution. It is one of the short and easy methods which only Christianity has the courage to refrain from, insisting upon human liberty, in its own Godlike way, often at the price of much inconvenience. Christianity and all despotism are opposites: one meaning faith, and the other fear. Judaism was a faint rudiment of Christianity, and so far favourable to freedom; but we see in the course of its history that it allowed a good deal of scope for despotism. We see this also in the written law of Moses. That law, the foundation of civil rights in Israel, gave a creditor the right to seize the children of the debtor if he died insolvent; so that they became his slaves till the year of jubilee, when they were set free. This regulation reminds us that the system of the Hebrew bondage was infinitely more considerate of human rights and instincts than the accursed and happily extinct systems of slavery in imperial Rome and in our colonies and in America.

But, returning to our story, this was the misery that stared the widow in the face,—that, having lost her husband, she must now lose her boys. They must go and be slaves. Imagine a woman of an ardent and affectionate nature placed in such a situation: her husband dead, and her sons the property of another, and herself to be left alone. It was too much to endure.

But could not Elisha help her? Yes; it is a thought from heaven which comes like a sunbeam into her miserable heart at the very moment when the inexorable creditor arrives to take away her sons. Instantly she runs off to the prophet, and appeals to him with all the eloquence of grief: "Thy servant my husband is dead; and thou knowest that thy servant did fear the Lord: and the creditor is come to take unto him my two sons to be bondmen." "What shall I do for thee?" says Elisha, speaking in the spirit and sense of those words of Peter: "Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I thee." "Tell me, what hast thou in the house?" Alas! what little in the shape of utensils and furniture she ever had is gone. "There is nothing except one pot of oil." The Divine Spirit at once reveals to him a method of consolation. He tells her to go and borrow of her neighbours an abundant supply of empty vessels: "Do not be content with a few, but borrow all you can." Then she is to shut herself in with her *children, to pour oil from her cruse into the bor-*

rowed vessels and fill them all, and then to sell this oil, and with the produce pay her debt, keeping the surplus for their own support. Strange counsel this! It may be doubted whether any one that we read of in the Gospels was put to a severer test. If the least suspicion had entered the poor woman's head, or if she had faltered in her choice between the path of human calculation and the path of faith,—she might have been willing to have made an experiment secretly,—but the idea of running about among her neighbours on such an errand, the dread of all the ridicule that would perhaps make her wretched life still more intolerable, would have made her wince. But she was now entirely possessed with faith; and it is of the essence of faith that, in the critical decisive moment, it makes no such timid calculations, and sees no difficulty in the way, sees nothing but the helping hand of God.

“So she went from him,” and made a number of calls of as curious a nature as ever took a woman to her neighbours' houses. We must fancy what questions were put and what answers given, evasive or otherwise. Inquisitive and incredulous the neighbours may have been, some of them, but they seem to have been good-natured and accommodating enough; and she sped so well with her incredible errand that in a short time the floor of her room was covered with vessels large and small.

She took care to shut the door and fasten it, as the man of God had bidden her, so that no one might intrude. There was to be no risk of any possible purloining of the wondrous property; no unnecessary disturbance or display. Hence the precaution; recalling the similar solicitude which our Lord so often expressed that His miracles might take effect quietly. *Now* the question is to be settled, whether this mother and her sons are to be torn away from each other, or not. Silently they begin, the boys doubtless wondering much. And the mother? She takes the cruse, possibly, with a trembling hand; but not with a trembling heart, as if it were a doubtful experiment that she was making. No; the brave woman is quite sure that all those vessels are going to be filled from this little one. So she takes it and begins pouring; and behold, the first that has been brought is filled to the brim. Then, as one son brings the next empty vessel, the other removes the one that has been filled, and so on—the oil still running. Observe, it is the widow herself, not Elisha, who holds the vial. It is not the prophet's power to which our attention is drawn, but the woman's faith. And still the oil keeps on running, till "there is not a vessel more"; and then, all being filled, "the oil stayed." Here is a gospel for us. To the utmost extent of our capacity, or power of receiving, we may draw upon the grace of God. He will give *as much as we can receive*. That is the sole

necessary limit of our faith. And even that is a movable limit, for such asking and receiving enlarges the capacity of the soul. "For still the more Thy servant hath, the more shall he receive." The Church is "the fulness of Him that filleth all in all;" and what a wonderful receptiveness that implies! How far the capacity of the children of God exceeds their attainment! How few, probably, receive all that they might receive, or anything approaching it! The oil stayed not until every receptacle was filled. But it would have stayed sooner if the woman had ceased pouring, if her faith had failed, or if she had said, There is enough now. "Fill the waterpots with water," said Christ at Cana: "and they filled them up to the brim." And all became wine. "He giveth liberally." It was the folly of the foolish virgins that they had only a little oil in their lamps for instant use, and had "no oil in their vessels with their lamps."

"Then she came and told the man of God," who during the process of the miracle had remained in the background: "And he said, Go, sell the oil, and pay thy debt, and live thou and thy children of the rest."

This little story sheds a heavenly light on temporal poverty, and on spiritual poverty too.

If you are poor in this world, it shows that faith in God's Fatherhood is a real insurance against want. *Such faith shall in nowise lose its reward.*

If poor people trust in God, it needs not that they live in an age of miracles to find the benefit of it. "Trust in the Lord, and do good, and verily thou shalt be fed :"—"though not feasted," as Matthew Henry pertinently remarks.

And as for the forlorn penury of the soul, the story of the cruse of oil teaches us to seek the improvement and increase of what we have. "Tell me, what hast thou ?" Is there not something in thee which God's miraculous grace may work upon ? Hast thou not some inclination to pray and repent, which might grow with exercise into a noble and steadfast aspiration after heaven ? some germ of tenderness, that might unfold itself into a great power of sympathy ? some special aptitude, that might be trained into a wide-spreading usefulness ? some folded wings, that might be expanded with a glorious effect ? some faith in the crucified One, that might bring you into a fellowship with Him more blessed than you have ever sought or imagined ? "Tell me, what hast thou ?" Use the little you have, and by-and-by you will grow rich. Instead of coveting the gifts of others, believe in your own gift. Have courage to believe that you too have something divine put in your trust. Make the best of it, and God will make the best of you.

We come now to the story of

THE SHUNAMMITE'S SON.

Rich people, as well as poor, figure as examples

in this Bible, which is man's book quite as emphatically as it is God's book. Everybody's Comforter shows His face in these pages. The Divine lover of souls, who completely revealed Himself in Jesus, lets us feel His heart wherever we search the Scriptures. Whatever you are—man, woman, or child—rich, poor, merry, or sad—because you are a human soul, you are dear to Him.

About three miles from the royal palace of Jezreel, and within view of the heights of Nazareth, was the village of Shunem. We may imagine Jesus Christ passing along this way sometimes, and familiar with the neighbourhood. The little city of Nain, of blessed memory, where Jesus gave back to the widow her lost boy, was within a short walk of Shunem. Elisha's walks often took him through this village. One day, a rich lady living there invited him to take refreshment at her house; after which, "as oft as he passed by, he turned in thither to eat bread." It is a pleasant hint of his character, that this acquaintance ripened into such a happy friendship. After a time, we see some workmen erecting a little room against the upper part of the wall of the house. It projected, like the large bay window of an Elizabethan mansion, from the blank wall; and had a front of lattice-work, through the openings of which the air could circulate. This little room, the "summer parlour" of the Easterns, was furnished with a bed and a table and a stool and a candlestick; and it was built for Elisha.

Resting himself here on one occasion, he began talking to Gehazi about his kind hostess, and bade him question her whether he could do nothing in return for her favours. When Gehazi reported that she had nothing to ask, he said, "What then is to be done for her?" He was reminded that she was childless, and her husband was old. Whereupon he sent for her, and thus addressed her: "About this time next year thou shalt embrace a son." To estimate the meaning of this promise, we must remember that she had not only the heart of a woman, but of a woman of Israel; and she was to be blessed in the same wonderful way as the mother of Israel, Sarah herself. Such a proof was this pious woman to experience of the grace of the God of Abraham.

The marvellous promise came to pass. A child was born. The house was lighted up with a new joy; all the brighter for coming so unexpectedly and so manifestly from heaven. The babe grew to be a lad; and we are sure that Elisha was now a more welcome guest than ever, and that the prophet and the child were excellent friends.

Happy days at Shunem! But the sunshine will not last. A sudden blackness comes over the scene. One of those tragedies which laugh so hideously at human happiness, and overhang every earthly paradise; worse than a sword of Damocles; more like the shadow of the fiend falling on the garden of Eden. Frightful possibility of death, that *so often looks* asquint into your earthly heaven;

cruel as a serpent's eye ; ghastly and astonishing, sometimes, as the handwriting on the wall of Belshazzar's banquetting-room. Worse even than that, it seems, when death ruthlessly tears to pieces hearts trusting in God. As if Death were stronger than God, or as if Chance had given us hearts yearning for a Father, only to encounter the stony glance of Fate.

Miserable was that morning when there came from the sultry harvest-field such a burden to the Shunammite's house. The boy, who went out to see his father, has had a sun-stroke, and the fever rages in his brain. His mother nurses him till noon, and then he dies.

Now this woman will show a faith worth studying. In her emergency she is just like the heroine of the cruse of oil, and there is nothing in her heart but faith. We ought to love the memory of those trustful souls whose hearts took such a hold of God as to bring Him nearer to us all for ever. Doubtless this Israelitish lady wept bitter tears over her boy. That afternoon could not have passed without some of those moments of hot grief, and some of those worse moments of dull misery, that stretch the hours to a thousand times their natural length. But a fixed purpose fills her soul the instant the boy's life has fled. Every line of the narrative shows this. We see her deliberately carry the corpse upstairs into Elisha's room, where she lays it on the bed, and shuts the door in leaving it.

Elisha is miles away, at mount Carmel. She is going to him. She requests her husband to send an ass, with a lad to lead and drive it, on which she may ride. When we listen to his reply, we almost think she must have concealed from him the death of the child. "Wherefore wilt thou go to him to-day? it is neither new moon nor sabbath." Why is the wife so reticent? Is it to spare the poor old man the pain of hearing that his son—his only son—is dead? That would have been beautifully considerate, but it was probably not the true cause of her silence. We rather suspect that she cannot trust herself to talk to her husband, or to any one, about the object of her hasty journey. Such faith as hers confers not with flesh and blood, cannot spend a moment in parleying with possible objections. Quick and right forward it goes, like "the lightning and the cannon-ball;" only, instead of "opening with murderous crash the way to blast and ruin," it opens the path to the help of the omnipotent Friend. Thus it moves on irresistible; and there is no arresting it or turning it aside, for the power of God is in it. She believes that God will befriend her now, as He has done, through the mediation of Elisha. Even in this utmost extremity, when death has clutched her child, and summoned her to give up hope, she refuses to give up hope. What a splendid example she is to a race of mortals who so easily give up, *especially in all contentions in which more than*

flesh and blood are concerned! Wise and pious though it be to yield gracefully to the inexorable, we ought to be quite sure it *is* the inexorable before yielding to it. The invincible sanguineness of this heroic woman, although exercising itself in the region of miracles, is most exemplary in this timid, easily-discouraged world—for such the world is, with all its incessant activity and endless undertakings—timid, and easily-discouraged. And God, who knows the world so much better than it knows itself, has set forth Christ for its everlasting encouragement. *Nil desperandum* shines out all over this weary world in the light of the Cross. Christ, rightly understood, speaks encouragement to all men, bidding them believe in God; so that the love of the Father may cast out the cowardly spirit of the world. And hence the Bible, which is full of Christ, and would be nothing without Him, is full of this same doctrine of courageous hope in God, illustrating it in a thousand ways. Here is a mother whose child is dead, but she will get him back again, she thinks. “O woman, great is thy faith.” And so, at the sultry noon-tide, beneath that burning sun, she sets off in the direction of mount Carmel. The miles seem long; but at last she is within sight of the place, yonder on the hill, where she hopes to find the man of God. He spies her approaching in the distance, and sends Gehazi to meet her. “Is it well with thee?” he asks; “is it well with thy husband? is it well with the child?”

And she can tell him quite honestly, though at the same time with an evident wish to parry his questions and put him off, "It is well." But, like that woman of Canaan long afterwards imploring the help of Christ, she must brook some sore delay. We see her clasping the prophet's feet, speechless for a while; and Gehazi, with a harsh officiousness which does not bode well of him, thrusting her away; and the prophet, ignorant what has befallen, kindly encouraging her to speak. True to the life is the woman's appeal. To ask plainly that her dead boy might come to life again, was more than she could frame her lips to. Such an explicit request we cannot find in all the resurrection-stories in the Bible. We have no instance of a distinct prayer that the dead might return to life. All she said was, "Did I desire a son of my lord? did I not say, Do not deceive me?" But the wonderful and almost impossible request is lurking here in the covert of these questions. Nay, it speaks out passionately through the disguise. The thought of her heart is confessed. "More is meant than meets the ear." Instantly, as the narrative would have us believe, the prophet perceives everything. It is of course conceivable that the woman told him of the child's death in words which the historian has omitted. But it is equally clear that the historian meant every reader to understand that the truth flashed upon Elisha in a sudden access of prophetic *illumination*; that all at once, and by a direct in-

tuition or sign, he saw that the child was dead (not in mere danger of death, as might have been inferred from the mother's grief, but dead), and that she was in her soul praying for his restoration to life, and that such a miracle was to occur. That all this became instantaneously clear to Elisha, the historian certainly means us to believe. "The man of God said, Let her alone; for her soul is vexed within her: and the Lord hath hid it from me, and hath not told me. Then she said, Did I desire, a son of my lord? did I not say, Do not deceive me? Then he said to Gehazi:"—and from that point the story of the miracle runs on. As if the thing which the Lord had hid from him was now told him. And so clearly does the narrative imply a sudden bursting of light upon the soul of the prophet at this juncture, that it strongly inclines us to believe that at one glance he saw the whole thing in its development and in its consummation. We cannot say that it is contained in the history that Elisha foresaw the failure of Gehazi's mission. But neither is it said that when Gehazi was sent with such haste to lay the staff upon the face of the child, his master expected that the stupendous miracle would speed in that off-hand way. On the whole, a careful reader will see that it would quite harmonize with the history to suppose that the prophet's reason for sending Gehazi was to dispossess the woman's mind of all superstition, of all faith in magic, of all exaggerated confidence in

himself. And this really is the nearest approach to a solution of the problem, although it is only an hypothesis. But whatever Elisha may have intended in sending Gehazi on before, the woman herself seems to have had no faith in it. Using a phraseology which we have heard from Elisha's own lips, and which may have been learnt from him, she said, "As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee." One thinks of the centurion saying, "Lord, trouble not Thyself to come under my roof, but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed." Only Christ could inspire a feeling like that. And so they press on together, Gehazi posting hard in front of them; and it is very questionable whether either of them is at all sanguine about the result of his expedition, and whether either of them is at all disappointed when he, returning, meets them on the road and says, "The child is not awaked." No matter! It only shows that magic won't do it, and that Gehazi is not the man for it, and that before this miracle come to pass, there must be still more faith exercising itself in crying mightily unto God. And these two faithful souls, nothing daunted, proceed on their way.

At last they reach the house, and Elisha repairs to his own little room, where the corpse lies on the bed. He enters the room alone, shuts the door, and prays. Imagine what a prayer that would be, *and in what strange company it was offered*; and

for what a marvellous sign from heaven. Those who invoke the quickening breath of the Spirit upon dead souls might picture to themselves this scene, so as to learn something from it. The wording of Elisha's petition is not preserved. It may have been the same, as we know the substance was the same, as that of a prayer which Elijah once offered at a similar crisis—a model of direct and simple asking: "O Lord my God, I pray Thee, let this child's soul come into him again." Elisha, in the great miracle that he is now engaged in, is treading in the footsteps of his mighty master; not, we must think, without a vivid recollection of what happened years ago at Zarephath: although we observe, by the way, that the resemblance between the two miracles is so mixed with unlikeness as to confirm, rather than to unsettle, the authenticity of the latter. The resuscitation of the widow's child at Zarephath was accomplished as soon as Elijah had stretched himself upon the corpse three times. But the resuscitation at Shunem was gradual. After Elisha had prayed, "he went up, and lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands: and he stretched himself upon the child; and the flesh of the child waxed warm. Then he returned, and walked in the house to and fro; and went up, and stretched himself upon him: and the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes." *The miracle was wrought, seemingly, by dint of*

strenuous exertion ; some think, to chide the prophet for having counted on too easy and off-hand a performance of it by just sending Gehazi with his staff. A doubtful criticism. For if he really were guilty of anything rash and small in that action, it would look as though Naaman must have been right in suspecting the prophet of putting on airs in sending his servant Gehazi to speak to him, instead of coming himself. It may be questioned whether we do not misread both the sublime narratives when we fancy the prophet, in the act of healing leprosy and of conquering death, speaking in such a *patois*. Was the gradual resuscitation of the child a rebuke for Elisha ? Was it a rebuke for him that at first the only sign of returning life was that "the flesh of the child waxed warm" ? Was it not a triumph, rather ? "A man subject to like passions as we are" could not have gained such a point and extracted such a boon from Heaven, surely, without a thrill and a flush unspeakably triumphant. It was a greater victory than Wellington's at Waterloo. But at the tomb of Lazarus, and at the gate of the city of Nain, and in the house of Jairus, what still greater victories ! What we have witnessed in the little room of the mansion at Shunem, forces into our thoughts another restoring of the dead, centuries after, in the house of the ruler of a synagogue. "He took the damsel by the hand, and said unto her, *Talitha cumi*. And straightway the damsel arose, and walked." What a contrast ! What

superior majesty! A greater than Elisha was there; One whom the greatest of the prophets merely heralded.

“They were but broken lights of Thee,
And Thou, O Lord, art more than they.”

The exquisitely touching sequel of the story is told, like all the rest, in simplest words. The bereaved mother, summoned into the room, is presented with her son “alive from the dead.” Now she is rewarded for all her pious kindness, with “an over-payment of delight;” as, indeed, every servant of the same God shall be. And the little room that she has built for the holy man, shall be remembered henceforth to the end of time; a holy place, it shall stand imperishable in human memory. So great is the recompense of thoughtful love, and of the faith that will not despair! With no thought of the fame in store for her, with no room in her heart for anything but the thankfulness which overflowed from it, she fell at her benefactor’s feet, “and bowed herself to the ground, and took up her son, and went out.”

A momentous distinction occurs to us in thinking of this miracle. The difference is infinite between the restoration of a dead person to this present life, and the Christian resurrection to life eternal. Christ’s resurrection was not a return to this life, but an ascension to a higher life.

Hence, all the recorded instances of such restoration, *whether in the Old Testament or in the New,*

belong to a class of phenomena entirely distinct from the Resurrection. They are nothing more than strong, splendid, far-shining signs of the mighty power and the tender pity of God. They cast little or no light into futurity. They utter not a syllable about immortality. They are essentially exceptions to the tragic monotony of the rule that the door of death opens only one way. It is only in general terms that they whisper consolation to bereaved hearts. So far from dispelling the death-shadow, when it gathers round a once bright home, they do not shed one beautifying ray into its gloom. Among all the myriads of broken-hearted mothers who have consigned their children to untimely graves, three or four seem to stand apart, favourites of Heaven; and even these, with their children, have been swallowed of all-devouring Death. Consolation they do speak. They tell us, "It is well;" but how it is to turn out well when Death thus mocks and ruins every earthly hope—on this point they are silent as the grave itself.

The resurrection of Jesus alone brings life and immortality to light, alone dispels the shadows and the sorrows of death. "For, if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also who sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him." The resurrection of the Lord was not a returning into this life. It was the beginning of His ascension to that glory in which He possesses all power to draw *us up after Him* from all that is polluted and

perishable. In union with Him, we become at once immortal, and our citizenship is in heaven. Our "continuing city" is even now already come, and we may walk in it in righteousness and peace and joy. "Whosoever liveth and believeth in me, shall never die." "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"

IV.

THE SYRIANS.

A JEW was as little fond of foreigners as a Japanese. His temperament, his geographical position, his traditions, and, we may add, his human nature, all had a tendency to cut him off from intercourse with the world, and to shut him up to himself. Above all, his noble national institutions, by their very excellence, inevitably tempted the Jew into a strange and unhealthy isolation among his brethren of the human family. Such a soul of evil is there in things good,—if we may thus convert the optimist adage into a pessimist,—that the mere superiority of Judaism, apart from its peculiarities, could scarcely fail to produce a race of bigots. There are proofs enough in the gospels of what a contracted thing Judaism had practically shrivelled into in the days of our Lord, when “the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans,” and when the Son of man so pathetically quoted the popular dialect in speaking of “the children” and “the dogs.” The narrow Judaism of those times contrasts forcibly with the breadth of the Old Testament; and the contrast cannot be forgotten without a grievous injustice to the Bible.

But, unlike the Japanese and the Chinese, the *Jew was never able to live quietly alone.* Either

he was always meddling with foreigners, or they with him. He was made cosmopolitan in spite of himself. His proud love of isolation brought him into the contact of collision with everybody. He could boast of a unique list of compatriots renowned among foreigners—Joseph, Moses, Jonah, Daniel. All his foremost men—Abraham, David, Solomon, Isaiah—together with the whole of the so-called minor prophets, had to do with the great outside world. In fact, it was the collision of the divinely-inspired Messianic ideas of the Jew with the anti-christian ideas of Egypt and Assyria and Babylon, which produced the greater part of the Old Testament.

It is, therefore, quite according to rule that we find the Syrians figuring so much upon the tract of sacred history that has Elisha for its centre. At that time they were the people who counted for most in the foreign policy of the kingdom of Israel. To Elisha and his contemporaries, the Syrians were the ideal foreigners. And his attitude and spirit toward the Syrians may be taken as exemplifying, on a small scale, the general attitude and spirit of pure, genuine Judaism toward the heathen world. In illustration of this, we may single out three transactions which Elisha had with those people. Two of the three will exhibit—what is indeed most visible on the surface throughout the Old Testament—the spirit of antagonism. The first that we shall speak of will exhibit—what is to

be seen everywhere beneath the surface—the spirit of mercy.

THE STORY OF NAAMAN

is the most celebrated and familiar part of the history of Elisha. Its unusual dramatic interest would sufficiently explain this, and the more so as it helps to cast such a vivid illustrative light upon central evangelical truth ; but yet we may venture to ascribe something of its great popularity to its own original, intrinsic value as a very ancient and brilliant sign of God's loving mercy to man, as man. Because it is this, it constitutes one of the most important, as well as interesting, pages of the Old Testament.

Elisha's transaction with the Syrian leper was a breach of Jewish propriety. It was an overstepping of the limits of ritualism, like some incidents—choice characteristic incidents—of our Redeemer's life, in which He came into contact with heathens and outcasts. But as Christ came in reality for the benefit, not of one nation, but of mankind, so in reality did all the prophets who prepared His way before Him. And so we may pronounce the irregular actions of the prophets, like those of the Master, to have been striking assertions of "the higher law," beautiful light thrown upon the far future track of the "increasing purpose" which runs through the ages. *Hence it is that Jonah's expedition to Nineveh*

possesses a prophetic interest quite its own. Hence, too, we feel a peculiar pregnant meaning in the story of Naaman, for it exhibits God's graciousness to a heathen, to a man who therefore emphatically represents *man*. The cleansing of this leper tells us that poor humanity, afflicted, miserable, and ruined, has an almighty Physician, who can cure even leprosy.

The irony of circumstances could scarcely be more cruel than it was to Naaman. What a picture it is that we have in the opening sentence of the story! The counterpart of it could not have been found in Israel, where leprosy made of its victim an outcast. This Syrian was no outcast. He was a grandee of the first rank, living in a blaze of publicity; the master of a great household, a centre of social influences, a commander of armies, a favourite of the King, a successful general, and a valiant soldier; talented, rich, powerful, respected, renowned: *but he was a leper*. A fearful *but*! That stroke of the pen runs through the whole category of enviable things. Nay, it is a blot that spreads over everything, and makes one huge blot of the whole. Hardly can we conceive a man so direfully afflicted able to hold up his head in the world at all, much less making a grand figure in it. He must have been a brave man to have done so; but verily the leprosy seems twice as ghastly amid all those glittering accompaniments, like a death's head at a feast, or like that skeleton of a queen that is to be seen in some

Continental church, beautifully dressed, and every finger and every toe covered with rings and jewels. History is rich in illustrations of this cruel irony of circumstances. One thinks of Cæsar in the Capitol, wrapping his mantle about him ; or of Louis "the Well-Beloved," in that sumptuous Versailles of his, dying of small-pox, and his courtiers all shrinking away from his room ; or of our own Prince of Wales, in those dark December days, when it seemed as though fortune had given him everything to snatch it away. But we need not fetch our instances from the history of princes, kings, and emperors. Every prosperous man of the world, every one who is happy without God, lies unawares in the grasp of this terrible irony of circumstances. "If he is rich, he is poor ;" the richer, the poorer : with health, wealth, success, influence, books, amusements, friends, a happy home ; with all that the world can do for him—*but* with a diseased soul ; with all his happiness resting on the thin crust of a volcano and over abysmal depths ; with the retributions of eternity frowning at him ; and with the constant possibility of being startled at any moment by a summons to quit that warm, bright, luxurious home and go forth shivering into the bleak dark winter, a bare and hungry and penniless wretch henceforth. Such a possibility, ripening fast into inexorable, unutterable fact—is it not a frightful sarcasm ? Dives, with hell yawning *under his mansion*, is the climax of this cruel irony

of circumstances which we see in the renowned Syrian leper.

But now we come upon a charming glimpse of the Providence that "*shapes our ends.*" From the miserable nobleman to the little maid is an agreeable transition ; for now we see a Divine irony of a widely different kind, in which trustful innocence turns to laughter the bitterest of outward misfortunes. Bitterest of misfortunes it was that befel this little Hebrew maid. Her parents lived in that part of the land of Israel which was in those days infested with bands of Syrian freebooters. In one of their excursions, like that in which Elisha himself, as we shall presently see, would have been caught and carried off but for a miracle, a party of marauders lighted upon this hapless child, seized her, and carried her away to their own country: There they sold her, and she became a slave in the house of Naaman. What a ruthless calamity to have pounced upon the maiden, dragging her away from home and friends, among strangers, foreigners, heathens, and making a slave of her—instead of the dear cherished little child that she had been—a slave ! But in this forlorn situation she found an opportunity of doing something which has embalmed her memory for ever, which has placed her figure prominently in one of the most popular stories in the whole Bible. Anywhere will do for a faithful heart. Beneath its influence the desert rejoices and blossoms as the rose. It was

but a little thing that she did, only a word or so spoken to her mistress in the simplicity of her heart ; but there was a thoughtful kindness in it, and there was faith, faith in the religion of her fathers, in the Holy One whom she had been taught from her infancy to love and reverence. And He, in His wondrous providence, used this faith of hers to set in motion the train of events which ended in the cure of Naaman's leprosy, used her faith as the foundation of a glorious, imperishable monument of His grace. And for nearly three thousand years there have been readers of this story, none of whom have read it without a kindly feeling for the little Hebrew maid. Let us not fail to notice here a beautiful habit of the Bible,—its way of bringing to light the faith of some obscure individual, and showing how God recognises it, and honours it, and makes it powerful for good. There is marvellous encouragement in this for all who are grasping His promise in obscurity or in sorrow.

“ Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear.”

But these are God's most rich and precious jewels, and every one of them will emerge from its dark hiding-place to shine for ever in the glorious palace of the Eternal.

The irascible side of human nature becomes very conspicuous as we proceed with our story. A letter comes to the king of Israel from the king of

Syria, saying, "Recover my servant of his leprosy." The little maid has been at work. Naaman has been spoken to and persuaded. He has been told "thus and thus said the maid that is of the land of Israel." He has gone to advise with his king, who is all anxiety for him to go and try ; so here he is at Samaria, with a royal letter of recommendation for his majesty the king of Israel, and with a right royal present for him or for any miracle-worker at his disposal who may heal his fell disease. The first effect of the presentation of this innocent letter was an explosion of rage from his majesty. "What means this? 'Recover my servant of his leprosy!'" It is a trap for him, a shameful insult, and he cannot contain his rage. And yet, if he would just listen for one minute to the bearer of this obnoxious letter, he would find that it not only meant no insult, but meant a very fine compliment. The Syrian king certainly betrayed ignorance, in supposing that the prophets in Israel were as entirely at the beck and call of their sovereign as was the case with his own soothsayers. At the same time, presuming this, and also that Elisha was universally known and would be at once answerable to a royal summons, he politely attributes to his brother-king the power of the prophet. This, in a mere letter of introduction, was a complimentary way of asking the favour, while it was left to Naaman himself to add the necessary explanations. But king Jehoram, as we know from other

proofs, was a testy man. He jumps to the conclusion that the other king is picking a quarrel with him, and hotly retorts, "Am I God, to kill and to make alive? Wherefore consider, I pray you, and see how he seeketh a quarrel against me." Laughable wrong-headedness, calling upon others to consider! Let *him* consider a little, and spare himself the trouble of rending his clothes. A bad man he was, and of a bad stock, and, as will presently appear, he came to a bad end; but, after all, more weak than wicked, and very pitiable, in the kind as well as in the scornful sense of the word. Let us feel sorry for him that he could not keep his temper; and let us not be too hard upon him and the *irritable genus* of which he is a specimen, considering how numerous its members are, and also "considering ourselves."

But Naaman himself is to read the world one of its most famous practical lectures on the great subject of Misunderstandings, otherwise called Insults. Elisha hears of the extraordinary visitor, and of his bad success with the king. And soon comes a message from the man of God, which we may hope the king, having somewhat recovered himself, can receive with a good grace; although of this we must not be too sure. "Wherefore hast thou rent thy clothes? Let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel." Damped and crest-fallen as the poor *Syrian general* must have been at his ill reception

at the palace, and suspicious, as he might well begin to be, of having undertaken a very insane journey, he plucks up courage once more at the arrival of this message. It is to be understood that he has faith, although a very shaky faith as yet, and with very little to support it, and with very much to discourage it up to this moment. But now, here is something which does indeed wonderfully strengthen the testimony of the little maid. What music in that message: "Let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel"! Off speeds the chariot, with Naaman expectant and impatient, in that quick journey from the King's palace to the prophet's house. A little pause at the door; and then comes a messenger, who delivers his message and retires. Alas! it must be unfavourable, for Naaman's countenance falls, and there is anger in his voice as he suddenly drives off. But what were the words of the messenger? "Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean." Why, Naaman, how is it thou dost not shout for joy, or art not, rather, speechless with expectation? Perhaps if we try to put ourselves in his place, we shall not think his conduct so astoundingly absurd, after all. Certainly we need be at no loss to account for it on principles familiar to human nature. He has arrived at the door of the prophet's house in a state of extreme excitement, fatigued in

body, and heart and brain hot with all the hopes and fears that have struggled in him all through his long journey, and have now reached a feverish height. He has pictured to himself again and again how the prophet would receive him, and the solemn invocation and the healing touch, and has held it all in his imagination till it has become a fixed idea. And all the while he has been haunted with a misgiving that he might be indulging in mere foolery; and if so, what a disappointment! nay, what a disgrace! For the great man to have gone all that way at the instance of the little maid! He has hesitated over and over again about turning back; and now that he is actually at the prophet's door, he is precisely in that well-known frame of mind in which a little rebuff will upset him. He is morbidly open to impressions of the unwisdom of his procedure. The king has treated him badly. Now, where is the prophet? and the ceremonious reception, and the solemn invocation, and the healing touch—where are they? "Here is a mere servant, with instructions that I am to go and wash in that miserable river of theirs; and what will come of that? If he can cure me at all, he can cure me here. How much further am I to travel on this fool's business? No; I have been befooled enough. Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? *may I not wash in them, and be clean?*" So *he turned and went away in a rage.*

Quite natural! It by no means follows that Naaman was a more than ordinarily passionate or haughty man. His faith was not heroic, like that of those women of Israel whom we have seen; but it was very severely tested. And we should mistake altogether the conduct of this man, at the crisis of his history which we are studying, if we resolved it all into touchiness and self-esteem. There is nothing to indicate more than the usual share of these qualities in him. He would have been a fool, and almost an idiot, if passion, or if pride, or if these united, had been the mainspring even of his momentary impulse to treat Elisha's message with scorn. No, there was more of anguish than of anger in the impetuosity with which he turned away. That cold reception, those misinterpreted words, were too much for his already staggering faith; and it broke down.

Broke down; but only for a moment. It will come all right yet, poor man. He is under better guidance than he is aware of. He has made a stumbling-stone of what was meant for a stepping-stone; but nevertheless, by God's good help, it shall serve its purpose. Undoubtedly it would have seemed more polite in Elisha to have shown himself to his illustrious guest; but those who fancy him putting on airs of superiority and self-importance at the idea of so great a man *petitioning* for his help, fall deliberately into just

the mistake which Naaman fell into in his haste, and afterwards felt ashamed of. It is not likely that Elisha was a student of etiquette; nor is it fair to accuse him of any wanton breach of it on this occasion. It is quite certain that, without ascribing infallibility to him in every detail, he meant nothing but kindness to the unhappy man who was waiting outside his door. It is also certain that, whatever the prophet meant by the seeming slight, God had a gracious purpose in it. This uninstructed, superstitious heathen will now learn that he is to be cured, if at all, by no magical touch of an enchanter, but by the living God Himself. And so, after the shock of disappointment and heat of passion had subsided, he soon caught the hint of the divine discipline which was passing him through a trial of faith. Instead of being incensed at the expostulation of his servants, it brought him at once to a better mind. Admirable, both for tenderness and for wisdom, was that appeal: "My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldst thou not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean?" It was enough. Like a child he went now toward the healing stream; "his angry spirit healed and harmonized by the benignant touch of love and mercy." And the most notable feature of this *miraculous* cure, and one that stamps it with the *signature of Divine reality*, is that, before "his

flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child," his soul came again like unto the soul of a little child. In the journey from the prophet's house to the river-side, what a melting and renewal of the heart Naaman may have undergone! "Then went he down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean."

This is really a wondrous prefiguration of God's way of dealing with us in the Gospel. For it is an unearthly and an unworldly thing, this Gospel of the crucified Son of God, this Gospel of pardon and purity, of new life and health and strength for us in Christ. It looks strange, romantic, foreign to the world's ways; and so it is. Human nature is so twisted and awry that it does not know how to adjust itself to the straightforward out-and-out simplicity of the heavenly message. Yet He who so freely forgives us and so entirely loves us—He does not despair of us; and our poor prejudices and misunderstandings are nothing to Him, no difficulty to the Great God. Our Divine Helper means that we shall unlearn all the guile of Satan, and learn the sweet simplicity of Christ. And when He seems to mock our conceit and lay us low in the dust, He is dealing with us as His dear children; not seeking to crush our spirit, but to do away with

our hard atheism and make us feel, and to bring out every germ of nobleness that He has implanted in us. We have only to believe in Jesus Christ. Only! Why, this is the grandest of all attainments as well as the simplest, the hardest as well as the easiest, the last as well as the first.

In the glowing joy of his new sense of health, Naaman was overwhelmed with gratitude. Like the Samaritan of that leprous fraternity that suddenly found itself clean, he returned and gave thanks to God; acknowledging that there was "no God in all the earth, but in Israel." His request for two mules' load of earth from the land of Israel on which to sacrifice to the God of Israel has in it nothing inconsistent with the pure theism of a Jacob, or a Jonah, or a devout Roman Catholic. A purely monotheistic faith will often call in the help of sentiment and imagination, of local associations and visible emblems, to give warmth and colouring and intensity to its conception of the Eternal Universal Lord. All devout souls do this, although in different ways. Puritanism itself can reckon among its professors some of the most imaginative of worshippers; and, all things considered, it seems that we ought to be very slow to accuse any one of idolatry on the ground of a predilection for material symbolism. Surely, Naaman's was innocent enough.

We cannot say quite so much for his proposed

outward compliance with idolatry, coupled with his resolution to abstain from it in his heart. The temple of Rimmon rises to his mind's eye, and the customary obeisance to the idol; and how can he be a nonconformist, with "the king leaning on his hand"? It would be necessary to shake off the king as well as the idol; but that is impossible. We see his conscience is not easy about it. *Qui s'excuse s'accuse*. He is sorry, very sorry, at having to crave the indulgence. He is abundantly thankful to the God of Israel and anxious to please Him; but he cannot think of relinquishing his high place in the Syrian court. A *via media* he must find, and will. So Elisha lets him "go in peace"; and if at any moment Elisha comes distinctly into our view as a great man, it is when he refuses to take a farthing of Naaman's magnificent offering, amounting to a fortune, at the very time that he grants this act of toleration to *him*. As for Naaman, it is evident that he is no martyr. It is not as a hero or saint, but as a thrice memorable instance of God's pity for sinful and suffering man, that he occupies such a conspicuous place in the picture-gallery of Scripture.

We now turn to our two illustrations of that sterner aspect of Jehovah toward the heathen world, in which the Old Testament represents Him, not as the Saviour, but as the Sovereign of men; guarding the just, governing the unjust;

His kingdom ruling over all, and all men serving Him. We see this in the picture of

THE CITY TWICE COMPASSED WITH HORSES
AND CHARIOTS.

There was a little city which lay among the mountains, on the caravan road between Gilead and Egypt, at the point of the road where Joseph's brethren cast him into the pit; and this little city of Dothan was now to be distinguished by another famous illustration of God's providence. Elisha had been traced hither by the indignant King of Syria, who was exasperated at hearing that the prophet had again and again apprized the King of Israel of his hostile movements. Early one morning the prophet's man, going out of the house, witnesses a startling spectacle. A Syrian host with horses and chariots has begirt the place during the night. Greatly terrified, he runs to his master crying, "Alas, my master! how shall we do?" "Fear not," said the master, "for they that be with us are more than they that be with them." Then he prayed that the young man's eyes might be opened. "And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha." This vision seems to have been an instance of that peculiar kind of clairvoyance which is often mentioned in *Scripture* as the effect of an extraordinary ac-

tion of the power of God upon the human mind. Balaam is "the man whose eyes are open." Zechariah says in relating his visions : "the angel that talked with me came again, and waked me, as a man that is wakened out of his sleep." We can distinguish these visions from those of the poetic imagination by one certain criterion only. They are represented as the effect of a *miraculous* operation of the Spirit of God. It is mere mysticism to assume that the things discerned in them were objectively real. We only know that they were symbolically real, having in them precisely the same kind of reality as there is in the beautiful and sublime imaginings of a Milton. A man of genius also is a seer, "a man whose eyes are open."

And whether we were speaking of the visions of a poet or of a prophet, of the visions arising from an innate or from a miraculously imparted insight, there would be just the same absurdity in imputing a hard solid realism to the symbolism in which the unseen things were bodied forth ; for example, to those "horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha." And if it would be folly to fancy them real horses and chariots made of real fire, it would be still greater folly to fancy that their being a mere symbolic apparition would make them worth one jot the less for their purpose. Chariots and horses were in those times the measure of a nation's might. Elisha saw, and was

anxious that his companion should see, that whatever power Syria might summon against them was wholly overmatched by the Divine power that stood their friend. So here is one set of horses and chariots arrayed against another ! only, those on our side are *fiery* ones. And fire,—the most ethereal, splendid, and irresistible of the forces of nature,—is the fittest image of God. So that the meaning is : “The Lord of hosts is with us. And if God be for us, who can be against us?” Here is a marvellous reversal of situations, the weak exchanging places with the strong. Rather, it is the truth brought suddenly to light about what seemed strong and what seemed weak ; and, behold, “things are not what they seem.” No, verily there is a God, and the might is with the right. Milton drew a sublime portrait of Satan ; but he let out the truth when he pictured a good little angel fearlessly challenging the fallen archangel as “wicked, and thence weak.” Safety and strength are in the honest heart that knows how to trust in God. “Be just, and fear not.” The lion that you see in the way of duty is a chained lion, or one that will run from you, or else perhaps a mere gossamer lion of your own fancy. Or even be it a real rampant lion, that would frighten you from the way of righteousness, you will have both the strength and the good fortune of Samson if you go boldly forward, *and will not only slay the lion, but find a swarm*

of bees and honey in his carcass. God so absolutely rules, that if we obey Him, our antagonist becomes our helper. "And who is he that shall harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good?" "The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them."

Thus Elisha, beleaguered by the forces of Syria, exults in the stronger forces of God. On this occasion he prays for two things, both of which are instantly granted. The first petition is, "Lord, I pray Thee, open his eyes, that he may see." And this is the other, "Smite this people, I pray Thee, with blindness." He was thus praying as they were approaching to capture him, when they were all struck blind, all smitten with blindness either total or partial. Probably the latter is meant; but we can fancy the utter bewilderment of these men, as their intended captive said to them, "This is not the way, neither is this the city: follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom ye seek." It was a stratagem, to be judged of as all such things are; and so they presently arrived at Samaria, and when their eyesight was restored, they found themselves at the mercy of the King of Israel. "My father, shall I smite them?" says the king; "Shall I smite them?" "No," answers Elisha, checking the ferocious monarch; "it is not as if thou hadst taken them captive with thy sword and with thy bow: set bread and water before them, that they may eat

and drink, and go to their master." So, instead of smiting them, he gave them a good feast ; and this band of freebooters must have returned home pondering much, and with their eyes opened in more senses than one. It was almost a humourous, and a very gentle, reprisal that was made upon these invaders ; and sending them back safe and sound, after all that had happened, was a really grand way of telling the Syrians how completely they were in the hand of Jehovah.

ELISHA'S INTERVIEW WITH HAZAEL,

the Syrian noble, and afterwards the Syrian king, curiously contrasts with the story of Naaman, with which it possibly stands in a closer chronological connection than appears in the history. The interview took place in the city of Damascus, the Syrian capital. As when that other Syrian noble came to Elisha, so now Hazael's business with him was to ask his help in a case of sickness. But this time it is the king himself who is ill ; and, anxious to know the issue of his disease, he sends his trusty minister to inquire of Elisha, commissioning him to take a present in his hand. A present accordingly he takes, even of every good thing of Damascus, forty camels' burden ; not that fewer camels could not have carried the offering, only it was usual to make the most of things on such occasions. Truly a dazzling display, of zeal as well as of wealth ! The king's minister seems to set

forth on his commission with a very good will. But he is a traitor. He is going to bribe the great magician, not in his master's interest, but in his own. Little cares he for Ben-hadad's recovery, as he comes into Elisha's presence to put the king's question, doubtless with a show of loyal solicitude, "Shall I recover of this disease?" And the ambiguous answer—that the king's illness was not fatal; but that his death was at hand notwithstanding—excited strange thoughts in him, as perhaps the prophet saw; for this wily courtier had in him the heart of a murderer. Uncomfortable moments those must have been for him, when Elisha "held him with his glittering eye," and looked him through and through, "until he was ashamed." By-and-by the man of God burst into tears. 'Why weepeth my lord?' asks the other, wishing himself well out of this interview; and such a reply came, telling him why, telling him what a scourge he was going to be to Israel, that the wretched man falters out, in the cringing style of the East, "What, is thy servant a dog?" A dog, or something worse, he forthwith proves himself; murdering his king on the following day, and in his subsequent wars and conquests fulfilling to the letter the appalling predictions of Elisha. He too, like Jehu, is God's instrument. As long ago as when Elijah was bidden to anoint Elisha, this very Hazael had been prophetically anointed as king over Syria. And in pursuing his own dark designs, he was acting ac-

cording to "the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God."

"For all are Thy servants." All men, all things, good, bad, and indifferent, are in the hand of the Father. Not even the devil and hell are independent of Divine Providence, nor it of them. "The Lord hath need of them," and employs them; not even disdaining, we may hope, to use the coarsest pictures and threats and warnings that are published in His name, at least as barking mouths of Cerberus to frighten people from sin. To be sure, that is no justification of such mendacities, and of them the Lord hath no need. Yet, like the sword of Hazeal and the furious driving of Jehu, they shall do something to answer His purpose. A story is told of a certain ship-owner who, while boarding one of his ships in the port of London, fell into the asphyxiating water of the dock. He was promptly pulled out, and the proper restoratives were successfully applied. His friends who were present, suggested that his recovery was providential; but the old gentleman somewhat sharply demanded whether his falling into the dock was not providential too. And, though his feeling was wrong, his reasoning was good. A bad thing is a providential instrument; and so is a bad man. This world is not half-governed by God; it is wholly in His control. "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will." *Pharaoh as well as Moses, Caiaphas as well as*

Christ, is a servant of the King of kings, and does homage to Him. Every human life, be it never so perverse in its course and bitter in its ending, glorifies the righteousness of God, and helps, however unconsciously, His magnificent merciful plans. The will of the Father is done on earth, although not yet as it is done in heaven. Not until the sinful self-will, the root of all misery, be destroyed—not until God's will be done with the full consent of man's will—can earth become like heaven. This is the goal toward which our world is hasting, slowly but surely hasting. And in the meantime His will prevails. Nothing thwarts God. Nothing goes independently of Him. So infinitely strong is He, that He compels evil itself into His service. But to be forced into it, what a different thing to being drawn, so as to serve with a glad heart in all the blessed freedom of love, doing the Father's will on earth, even as it is done in heaven!

V.

SEVERITIES.

PATER noster, is it credible that such things have been done in Thy name? Thou who art Love, is it possible that Thou hast Thyself sanctioned and done these things? The severities chronicled in Scripture, of which we have several specimens in our present history, may fairly raise questions of this sort; indeed, they naturally provoke such questions; and they go far to excuse a good deal that has been said by indignant Byrons and Shelleys in utter misunderstanding, we may humbly suspect, of the true theological tone of the severities which they denounce.

The questions are fair; and the Bible fairly answers them. It does not extenuate and attenuate, as some do, the doctrine of the divine Love and the divine Fatherhood. It does not teach that God is love, *but* that He is also just and wrathful; as if the righteousness and wrath were a discordant and a foreign element. It does not teach that God is a Father of men, *but* that He is also a Governor and a Judge. The Bible knows nothing of such *buts*. It maintains all through, with perfect simplicity and integrity, the doctrine of the Epistle of *John*, that God is love. And although the Father-

hood of God is far more explicitly taught in the New Testament than in the Old ; yet, as Christianity enables us to see, it is implied in the Old, from Genesis downward. And the answer which the whole Scripture gives with one voice to all challenges of inconsistency is, that it reveals God as redeeming mankind, through suffering, from sin. All the misunderstanding and all the difficulty attaching to the problem arise from confused ideas on the relative importance of suffering and sin. Physical evil is looked at through a magnifying glass, while the inverted magnifier is applied so as to dwarf the gigantic proportions of moral evil. Not sin, but suffering, is regarded as the ultimate misery, from which man wants to be saved, and in which consists his hell. These ideas, being congenial to "flesh and blood," are present with us all. They are easily entertained without being definitely recognised ; and they secretly lie at the root of all philanthropic ill-will toward the Bible and of all hard, narrow, and inhuman theology. Once construe the redemptive purpose of God into a scheme of deliverance from external instead of spiritual evil, and there springs up an imagined opposition between the severity and the goodness, between the judgments and the mercies, which the Bible and all history and all nature present to our view : an opposition wholly unreal. The severity and the goodness, the judgments and the mercies, are all expressive of the same love, which does not

care what suffering and sorrow it inflicts, if only sin be conquered. And if it be true, as the Book often seems to say, that God Himself suffers all that He inflicts, then what marvellous love in the severity of God!

Such an ineffable blending of sweetness and severity as we see in the Redeemer Himself, and, if we may name them with Him, in His apostles, we do not look for in Elisha. How wonderful and how God-like it is, that Christ, who was the severest teacher the world ever listened to, should, notwithstanding, produce in all hearts the feeling of His having been the kindest! In Him, the Incarnate God Himself, the love is so apparent that the severity is lost sight of. Here is the true point of the contrast between Him and Elijah or Elisha; a contrast that is made additionally striking by the fact that Christ never, by any of His miracles, inflicted pain or hurt upon a human being. That is a fact whose touching and prophetic significance it would not be easy to overrate; telling the world, as it seems to do, that He who comes to destroy sin, will, in the end, have destroyed sorrow too, and "there shall be no more pain." And such a fact should make us wary of overstating the resemblance of Elisha's miracles to the "works" of the Son of Man. Elisha was no redeemer and no apostle, but a reformer and a revivalist. The severity which was lost sight of in Jesus, was *obtrusively* characteristic of *him*. And yet he also,

in his day and generation, was the accredited faithful Prophet of the Father of men, of the merciful God.

Out of our scanty materials for a biography of Elisha we can furnish a list of severities which bears some proportion to the list of benefactions. The first in the list in the order of time—the story of the children of Bethel and the bears—it will be well to examine last, on account of its being beset with a difficulty, real or supposed, which does not embarrass any of the others. Postponing this, the next thing of the kind which occurs in the history is

THE SLAUGHTER OF THE MOABITES.

We must now look at a ghastly picture. Upon the wall of the stronghold of Moab, the infuriated king, driven mad by the cruelty of his irresistible enemies, immolates his firstborn son as a burnt-offering to his Moloch, before the eyes of the besiegers. Elisha was responsible for the turn of affairs which ended in this horrid scene. If we could settle how far he was responsible for the malignant spirit which possessed the Israelites after their victory, or whether he was divinely warranted in issuing his terrible orders, it would throw some light on a dark problem. The Moabites, descendants of Lot, had been, from the days of Balak and Balaam, foes to Israel. David had thoroughly cowed these pugnacious neighbours of his, and had levied on them a

heavy tribute. But now, since Ahab's death, they have re-asserted their independence, and the tribute has not been forthcoming. The result is, that we see a large army, led by three kings, and composed of the allied forces of Israel, Judah, and Edom, marching through the desert south of the Dead Sea, on its way to the land of Moab, to beat down this rebellion. But the district where it was expected that plenty of water would be found was now dry; and without water they must all perish miserably. Elisha, if not in the camp itself, was in the neighbourhood of the army. He was applied to in this frightful emergency; and the next morning saw a stupendous miracle. At the time when the morning sacrifice was offered in the temple at Jerusalem, "behold, there came water by the way of Edom, and the country was filled with water." Now we shall see the pre-arranged effect of this miracle upon the Moabites. They, on their part, had mustered their whole strength against the invaders. The rays of the morning sun falling upon the water made it, in the distance, "red as blood;" the redness of the soil, in which trenches had been dug for the reception of the water, perhaps heightening the effect. The Moabites, familiar with the region, knew that hitherto there had been no water, and supposed it was blood. But how could they imagine such a quantity of blood? We can follow them in their sanguinary calculations, although at *first sight* their conclusion may startle us. What

so likely as that three such allies as Israel, Judah, and Edom should have quarrelled among themselves? There has been a great slaughter. "Now, therefore, Moab, to the spoil!" On they rush, into Elisha's trap. Defeat and rout were the sequel, but not the end of their disaster. For Elisha had said, "Ye shall smite every fenced and choice city, and fell every fruit-tree, and stop all wells of water, and mar every good field with stones." It would be an evasion to say that this was only predicted. It was ordered; and the invaders did the dreadful work. The miserable Moabites fly before their merciless pursuers, leaving havoc and desolation behind them. At last the king finds himself beleagured in his great stronghold. High on a steep rock, where the Crusaders built a fortress, and from which might be seen the Dead Sea, and even Jerusalem, the castle stood; and after an unsuccessful attempt to break through the besiegers, the frantic king sacrifices his firstborn son upon the wall. Here was the defiance of desperation. "*Whereat there was great indignation against Israel.*" A very tame and superfluous comment, if it meant that the Moabites were indignant; but a very notable one, if it meant that God was indignant! And undoubtedly it is the Divine indignation to which the statement refers. The word which is here translated as "indignation" is often elsewhere used for God's wrath against sin, and it is used in no other sense; and the meaning is, that this deed of horror

excited *God's* indignation against Israel. Now, if Elisha's aforesaid order were issued revengefully, and at the mere bidding of his own fierce patriotism, the whole thing would stand, of course, on the same footing as the worst atrocities of war ; and there would not be the shadow of a difficulty in the statement that "there was great indignation against Israel." But if he spoke from a Divine impulse, it must be confessed that we have to deal with a somewhat perplexing problem. The doubt thus raised, as to Elisha's authority in issuing such a dreadful mandate, is quite insoluble ; and so we cannot say that those extreme measures against the Moabites had any Divine sanction at all. But whether or not, God's "indignation against Israel" is intelligible, and is deeply suggestive. Even supposing that it were allowable to think of the exasperating punishment of Moab as having an express Divine sanction, and even if Israel had been as devoutly zealous in the infliction of it as the avenging angel himself, would it not have been a cause of Divine sorrow to have to execute such judgment ? But Israel was grossly apostate, idolatrous, bad as the heathen, or worse ; and we may well believe that this measure of severity was carried out in such a devilish spirit, that God looked with "great indignation" upon Israel. We find a parallel to this in Jonah's vindictive desire to see Nineveh destroyed, and in God's expostulation with *the angry prophet* : "Thou hast had pity on the

gourd ; and should not I spare that great city ?'—words which cast a flood of light on the spirit of God's judgments on the world. "For He doth not afflict willingly"; His wrath is love. Yes ; and His love, to a loveless heart, becomes wrath ; as we shall now see in the story of

GEHAZI'S LEPROSY.

Is it not the same God and the same Elisha who takes away the leprosy from Naaman, who fastens the leprosy upon Gehazi ? All symbolic, and everlastingly preaching to us. There goes the happy Naaman, ready to leap and cry for joy, hardly daring to think how glad he is. So mayest thou, burdened, broken heart, that canst not bear the intolerable wrong thy own sin has done thee, and hatest the abominable thing all the more because it is thy own. Thou mayest go happy, pure, healed of thy dreadful disease. Thou mayest go exulting with a strange joy in thy salvation ; light, innocent, and free as a child's heart once more ; saying, "No, that evil thing is not mine, for Christ has taken it away from me. Christ has healed my disease and renewed my youth." Be merry and rejoice, thou broken heart. Thy leprous past is past ; and, by a miracle, Christ possesses thee of a snowy purity fit for heaven. But remember—for there are two sides to all these great truths of God—thou must forsake thy crooked ways. Naaman may go away joyful and thoroughly sound, were

he the worst leper in all Syria ; but there goes Gehazi too, a different spectacle, sickening to behold, as he leaves Elisha's house ; just now so brisk and shrewd, so glib with falsehood, adroit and successful man ! with his two talents of silver, solid and heavy, besides those beautiful costly changes of raiment, dear to the Oriental heart, male and female alike. His treasures are safely deposited in the little tower yonder, and he has done a good day's work. He will be a rich man, much better off than his master, if he goes on so. Behold, the door of Elisha's house opens,—and here he comes, miserable ; the same man who brought that message to Naaman a few hours ago, but, oh, how changed ! “ *a leper as white as snow!* ” Sudden, appalling change ! Nay, sudden, appalling *discovery*, we should rather say. The man has been cheating himself. He thought himself so happy and fortunate in sinning ; but now the flimsy disguise falls off, and the fact is become all at once frightfully palpable, that sin is all one with misery. Poor Gehazi a little while before stood preaching a gospel of hope to that other leper : “ Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean.” Now he stands in that same doorway preaching a gospel of terror to all passers-by whom it may concern : “ Be terrified, all you that are going in the way that is not good. And if you are prospering *in it*, and are rather proud and glad of your suc-

cess, then be all the more terrified, because all the more sorrow is in store for you, unless you repent. And you had better make haste, or it will be the worse for you. Get it by heart—the sooner the better—that sin is not gain, but grievous loss.” Thus Gehazi, at his own ruinous cost, preaches with a voice that will reach to far-off generations. His leprosy made him *look like himself*, and mirrored his real condition, so that he could see how miserable he was ; and if any bad man could see himself with equal distinctness, he would pray in an agony to be saved.

It may strike some readers of this episode of Elisha’s history as having been very hazardous and very trying to the nerves, to have had anything to do with those fierce old prophets. The probability is, that honest people felt comfortable enough with them ; but it certainly was very dangerous for bad men to be in their company, and especially to cultivate their friendship for secret selfish reasons. Gehazi, the servant of Elisha ; Judas, the apostle of Jesus : what but mischief and misery can come out of such false relations ? There is nothing so foolhardy as entering into a hypocritical alliance with religion. God will set such crooked matters right somehow ; but it is a fearful experiment. Let us not turn our eyes from that affrighted, agonized man, full of sudden leprosy and remorse, without a wholesome warning ; nor yet without a hope that his leprosy led him to repentance.

Further on in the history we find a companion-picture to this in the story of

THE KING'S ATTENDANT WHO WAS TRODDEN
TO DEATH.

It was in a moment of miraculous escape from the grip of war, siege, and famine that this tragedy happened. After that Syrian raid in which the marauders were all smitten blind, the history says that "the bands of Syria came no more into the land of Israel." But that merely means that there was a cessation of the loose guerilla warfare which had been harassing the country, and perhaps a complete lull of all hostilities for a time. By-and-by, however, the regular war is resumed on a grand scale. Benhadad's army is at the gate of Samaria. The capital of Israel is besieged. A famine full of horrors rages within, while a great Syrian host is encamped outside. When the famine is at its height, and mothers are killing their own children for food, Elisha comes forward and predicts in the name of the Lord that on the following day food shall be as abundant as now it is scarce. Scornfully a nobleman of Israel, an attendant of the king, answers him: "Behold, the Lord will make windows in heaven." But he is to know that it is not a time for bombastic irreligious jesting. The people are to see that it is just this proud grovelling unbelief which curses and afflicts them. At once *comes the scathing rejoinder*: "Behold, thou shalt

see it with thine eyes, but shalt not eat thereof." That same night there passed through the midst of the tents of the wide-spread Syrian army a terrifying sound as of a great host, "a noise of chariots and a noise of horses." Real or imaginary, the sound startled the besiegers out of their slumbers, filled their bewildered fancy with innumerable Hittites and Egyptians advancing upon them, and occasioned such a panic, that when some leprous men went that way in the morning twilight, the Syrians were all clean gone. So hurried was their departure, that they have left behind them their tents and all their provisions. The astonished lepers pass from one deserted tent to another, eating and drinking and loading themselves with valuable spoil, which they hide. Presently they carry the tidings to the watch at the city-gate. The news flies to the palace. The king suspects treachery. Scouts are sent forth along the eastern road, who find "all the way full of garments and vessels, which the Syrians had cast away in their haste." Quickly it spreads through the starving city. There is a rush of the whole famished populace through the gate to plunder the tents of the Syrians. Elisha's promise comes to pass; ay, and his threat too. The rush having been foreseen, one of the king's attendants has been set to keep order at the gate. In trying to do so, he is thrown down in the violent crowd and crushed to death. It is the very man who was yesterday parading his

scepticism. A severe prophet ! Yes ; but the servant of a severe God. If there be anything in the world that God is severe with, it is the hard unbelief that stands more than anything else in the way of His mercy.

We place at the end of our black list, as decidedly the strangest of all the severities recorded in Elisha's history, if not anywhere else, the unique account of

THE CHILDREN OF BETHEL TORN BY
THE BEARS.

“ And he went up from thence unto Beth-el : and as he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out of the city, and mocked him, and said unto him, Go up, thou bald head ; go up, thou bald head. And he turned back, and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the Lord. And there came forth two she bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two children of them.”—2 KINGS ii. 23, 24.

This is the most unprepossessing of Scripture stories ; a bugbear to friendly readers, and a delight to critical ones. And the worst or the best of it is, that its harsh features admit of scarcely any, if any, mollification. The extreme terseness and the laconic brevity of the narrative have occasioned very little ambiguity. It leaves hardly any scope for ingenious and amiable suppositions. It baulks our efforts to tone down its terrible rigour. In vain it is urged that these victims of ursine ferocity were not young children, but were lads, big boys, *young men*. “ The wish is father to the thought.”

The original is explicit in its use of the two words literally rendered "little children." Not much more successful is the suggestion that the "tearing" was not killing, but only severe scratching, unattended with loss of life or limb. It must be admitted that this is a very bold euphemism, when it is remembered that the word in question signifies to cut, cleave, rend asunder, and that such an operation was performed, according to the history, by animals ranked among the fiercest in creation. Still, imperfect as this hypothesis may seem, we would not dismiss it as wholly unworthy of consideration; it may be worth something to pious and benevolent minds that cannot otherwise reconcile the story with the eternal justice of God.

A wiser method seems to be to take it in its natural sense, if we take it at all, as a designedly startling instance—the strangest on record—of that severity which comports with the Fatherhood of God, and which does not always allow of our adjusting His judgments to our own balances. And easy as it is to shriek at Elisha's barbarity, or to wish the Bible well rid of those two insatiable infanticides, it surely is far better to consider the thing in this way.

To say that we do not understand it, is indeed altogether different from saying that we do not believe it. A little consideration will show that it is not a trifle whether we class it among facts or fictions. But it will also show that merely to

give it up as grossly unintelligible is not worthy of any one who thoroughly believes in the Bible.

The story is either false or true. Suppose it false. Take it for granted that it is false. Dismiss it on the ground of its intrinsic unlikelihood, its palpable moral unfitness for a place in holy Scripture. Tear off that corner of the page, and throw that horrible story into the fire. But you will have to throw the Bible after it, following the example of our philosophical reviewers. You would gladly have a revised Bible—a revision of the original, as well as of the translation—less open to the ridicule of the wise. But it cannot be had; and if we are frightened at this grim story, if we discard it for its impropriety and inhumanity, if we throw it into the rubbish-hole for the only reason that our morals, or customs, or feelings will nohow agree with it,—where shall we stop, or how much of the Bible shall we keep? “For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthah; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets;” not one of whom can we level up or level down to our modern philanthropic standard; not one of whom has been able to show his face among “thinkers,” since Voltaire taught men how to think aright. Abolish the she-bears, and a whole menagerie of Biblical *bêtes noires* goes along with them.

If we pass, then, to the supposition that the story is true, it is at once clear that it could not

have been Elisha who instigated the fierce beasts to tear the children. His cursing of them may have been a flash of strange fire; it may have been a merely human or inhuman act; but he could not have set the bears on them. It was not his doing. If it had been, he would have required a supernatural ægis for the rest of his lifetime, or the mothers of Bethel would have torn him worse than the bears had torn the children. But these were not bears which Elisha took about with him. On the other hand, are we to say that the bears were actually inspired in this terrific onslaught of theirs? If so, it certainly looks more like a devilish than a divine inspiration. The indisputable fact, however, that such things as bears, hyænas, crocodiles, and sharks exist, and are even called *creatures*, is rarely urged, even by "thinkers," in opposition to our faith that God is love. Moreover, such things as *coincidences* often present themselves in human history—striking situations, dramatic surprises, in which moral evil and physical suffering are brought into a most wonderful and unlooked-for co-operation. The Bible is very rich in these dramatic surprises; so also is all history. Now in such coincidences we may recognise what we need not scruple to call Divine judgments, endlessly graduated in their adaptation to circumstances. Sometimes, as in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, sin is the assigned cause of the calamity. Sometimes, as in

the destruction of Herculaneum and Pompeii, sin has no immediate connection with it whatever, and it is merely a warning not to live too near a volcano. Sometimes the catastrophe happens quite in the natural course of events, and yet at the identical time which fixes it in connection with some wickedness that wants chastising, and so the individuals implicated, or caught, at such times occasionally seem to get even more than their due. There is no real difficulty in classifying along with these frequent significant coincidences the story of the she-bears and the children.

We are not required to suppose that these children were so monstrously wicked that they were punished according to the same rule as the people of Sodom. In the vast majority of instances there is no traceable or credible connection between unusual suffering and unusual sin. "Suppose ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such things? Or those eighteen upon whom the tower of Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay; but except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." That was a sweeping judgment, in the time of Noah, in which men, women, children, and babes were drowned. We don't want to paint these little children of Bethel like little demons. It is to be feared that their parents were wicked *people*, and that they themselves were exceedingly

naughty children ; very uncouth and very unpromising, perhaps. To some extent, unquestionably, these ill-mannered and ill-favoured young children brought themselves under the ban of the wrathful prophet and under the claws of the savage bears. But it was still more their misfortune than their fault that they were identified from their birth with an abominable superstition which was just then grappling in death-grips with the divinest system of religion which had yet gained a footing on the earth. It was their misfortune more than their fault, that they were venting their traditional hatred and contempt on Jehovah's prophet at the very time when those two bloodthirsty monsters were prowling within scent of them. The frightful catastrophe follows while the words, "Go up, thou bald head," are scarcely out of their lips. And the Bible, as its habit is, merely seizes upon this coincidence, and puts it on record with sublime indifference to criticism, for mankind to make what they can make of it.

And when we take into our view all the accompaniments of this ghastly incident, we find it not unworthy to illustrate the general doctrine of Scripture which we have contended for, concerning the loving severity of God. Bethel was the scene of it ; and a key to its interpretation lies in this fact. Bethel, where in the early dawn of Jewish history the lonely Jacob had built an altar, had grown by this time to be the busy head-quarters of

a great schismatic worship, centering in a very different altar which now stood there; and instead of Jacob's ladder for a sign of the Divine presence, there was a golden calf. A school of the prophets also maintained itself there; under difficulties, we must think. At this place, the very centre of the superstition that was destroying Israel, and trying with the whole of Satan's might to strangle faith in Israel's God; at this place, where even the little children are taught to sneer at the name of Jehovah, and come out in crowds to yell at the Reformer who would lead the nation back to the faith of Abraham and of Moses, bidding him go up after Elijah, that they might be rid of them both; and this at the time when signs and wonders were God's elected means of turning the tide of idolatry; is it incredible that a coincidence or providence of a startling terrible nature should occur? Was it not the very place and the very time when such a tragedy—call it coincidence, providence, or judgment—would have a real significance?

Yes; it belongs to the history of Elisha, as much as the healing of Naaman's leprosy does; and in spite of the incredible wisdom of the men who would smile at the absurdity of believing either, there are still sound reasons for believing both. The Bible is responsible for this horrible story, along with so much besides that has been cast into limbo by those in whom true wisdom *and knowledge* have appeared for the first time

in our world. And we dare affirm that to relegate this story, *et hoc genus omne*, to the region of myth or to some approximate province, in deference to the "higher criticism" and the "finer feelings," and at the same time to believe in Christianity, is a proceeding more innocent in the modern than in the classic sense of that word. The Bible is apparently the most inconsistent of all books ; but in reality the most consistent and coherent. And there runs all through it an appalling undertone of wrathful antagonism to man's desperate sinfulness : as if God were travelling with infinite sorrow through all the long tragic history ; as if the task of redeeming mankind were such that the merciful Father disregarded all minor considerations of mercy for the sake of it, and spared not Egyptians and Israelites, and spared not the children of Bethel, and spared not His own Son, that His redemptive purpose might work itself out : an appalling undertone, which runs right through the Old Testament and the New, sorrowful or fierce, or both. Apply your ear to any part of the Word. Listen, and you may hear the deep bass, the rumbling thunder ; and ever and anon there comes a flash. This tragic and frightful story is in keeping with the severe side of the Bible : does not look like a thing foisted upon it, or a fly in the ointment, but seems to be in its right place ; and represents fairly the dark side of God's dealings as the book records them ; represents fairly

the indignation of love wherewith God labours to redeem unloving man. It is in keeping with the whole Scriptural ideal of God, and preaches to us in the same tone as the Cross of Christ itself. Infinitely tolerant as God is, so as to excite the astonishment of all men, there is no being so intolerant as He—so incapable from His very nature of letting things alone—of letting evil have its own way. Because He is the Redeemer, He is a consuming fire. Because He loves our souls, He hates and punishes our sins. God will inflict and allow suffering to any extent rather than tolerate sin. Yes ; even though He feels all the suffering that He inflicts and allows. Let those who will, say, What a Moloch is this God of yours ! We can find no other representation of God so full of ineffable beauty as this.

VI.

THE DEATH OF ELISHA.

A DEATH-BED naturally suggests a retrospect. The extraordinary scene which we witness on approaching Elisha's death-bed we cannot appreciate without having in our mind's eye the strange attitude in which he has always had to stand toward the occupant of the throne. This concluding chapter of our history, offers therefore a good opportunity for a retrospective glance at the prophet's doings with the kings of Israel. As we enter the room where the old man is dying, our attention is divided between him and the younger man who is weeping at his bed-side. This is the king of Israel. And he is actually shedding tears at the thought of that long life passing away to leave such a blank in the land of Israel! Hardly should we have looked for such a mourner at such a death; a king of Israel weeping for an Elisha! But the dying man is ninety years old; and several kings have lived and died, and a dynasty has perished and a new one risen, since those days when Elisha's name was a bugbear and a terror to the king. The man who is now weeping at his side is the sixth that has worn the Israelitish crown since Elisha was first called to the office of a pro-

phet. This Joash is the third of the anti-Ahab line, which took its "divine right" from the mouth of our prophet and its anointing indirectly from his hand. He is the grandson of Jehu, the exterminating scourge of the race of Ahab, the furious driver, driving on a royal road which was composed mainly of corpses, nevertheless, driving in Elisha's name, and with his real or imagined sanction; and the new dynasty is naturally better friends with him than the old one was. Always, as we said, it has been the prophet's fortune to stand in a strange relation to the king. He lived during six reigns; but whoever his majesty might be, there never was any real friendship or concord between the two principal personages of the realm. The civil and the spiritual chief were always irreconcilable enemies or cold and distant friends. Of personal sympathy and of cordial fellowship, there was nothing possible at any time. Still, to be merely neglected, as he was during the last three reigns, was in some respects an improvement on being mortally hated, as he was during the first three. The neglect was probably reciprocal, like the hatred. The personal qualities of the house of Jehu would hardly be more to the prophet's taste than those of the house of Ahab; while the severely good man, the high-souled saint, would be as little attractive to the one licentious court as to the other. But the open *public relationship* that existed between him and

the first royal family that he had to do with, was not only unlike that which connected him with the second; but was just the reverse of it. To Ahab's family, he was a pest, an avowed messenger of vengeance. To Jehu's, he was a patron, lending the authority of his name to their assumption of royalty. The closing scene of his life forcibly suggests these recollections.

We should not have seen a son of Ahab weeping in the prophet's death-chamber. Any of Ahab's progeny, were there any remaining, would have rejoiced rather. Elisha was from the first the professed enemy of that evil brood; bent on crushing it, frowning and fulminating at it; and at last instigating Jehu to put an end to it. This war to the death with the house of Ahab and with the priests of Baal, was part of Elisha's business. And it must not astonish us if, in a man charged with business like this, we see reason to suspect some lack of courtesy, if we find symptoms of his having somewhat wanted softness of speech and manner. Although fighting for God has sometimes taken a very rough and terrible form, it has still been genuine fighting for God. In all sorts of ways this warfare has to go on. Cardinal Wolsey and Sir Thomas More had a "quarrel of God" with William Tyndall and others of the same persuasion. That was a mistake, and so were the Crusades; but all such quarrels have not been mistakes, nor shams. And we do not think of protesting

against the roughness and cruelty of Saint George, when we see the writhing of the dragon. Elisha was in reality a dragon-slayer, though he had milder functions; and among the numerous heads which the Great Serpent has upreared, we may count, in his time especially, the priests of Baal, Queen Jezebel, and her son Jehoram.

This Jehoram, son and successor of Ahab, was king of Israel during the first twelve years in which Elisha held the office of chief prophet of Israel. We have seen him acting a part in Naaman's drama, not a kingly nor a manly part. His performance on that occasion, as well as the prophet's rebuke would have indicated a coolness between them, were there nothing else to prove it; but other things that we know of make it probable that he purposely ignored "the prophet in Israel" on receiving the king of Syria's letter, and that he would not have been half so excited about that business, if it had not nettled him to think of applying to the hated son of Shaphat. It is true that he was saved, not once nor twice, from the Syrians, by Elisha's timely warnings. That is a curious instance of an apparent inconsistency which is thoroughly life-like, and is corroborative, in a high degree, of the history. There is,*

* In chap. 8, ver. 1-6. This section is generally thought to belong, chronologically, to the end of the 4th chapter. It would, however, equally secure a consecutive narrative to insert the whole of the fifth chapter between the sixth and seventh verses of the eighth chapter.

indeed, one glimpse of him in which he is seen conversing very amiably with Gehazi, and asking him to recount "all the great things that Elisha hath done." While the recital is in progress, and the king is listening to the account of the restoration of a dead body to life, the woman of Shunem presents a petition to his majesty. A famine of seven years' duration has compelled her to quit her home; and she now begs back her forfeited rights. The king, in acceding, is to be understood as doing a graceful act of homage to Elisha. Like his father Ahab, he seems to have had something gracious in him which was completely nullified, or corrupted, though imbecility of will and undisciplined strength of passion. Unhappiest of men! We can so little rely on the strict consecutiveness of these ancient chronicles that we cannot be sure whereabouts this bright spot occurred in the intercourse of the king and the prophet. The history, however, casts its light upon a couple of passages in that intercourse which too unmistakably reveal its real character.

When those three kings, with all their troops, were nigh perishing of thirst in the wilderness of Edom, and went suppliant to Elisha, it was not the king of Israel, but the king of Judah, who suggested going to him; and when they find him—these three kings allied in such hideous and helpless distress—and sue the man of God for his help, he scornfully turns on this Jehoram, with, "What have I to do with thee? Get thee to the prophets of thy father,

and to the prophets of thy mother." The king, stung as he is by the necessity of appealing to him, feels so completely at his mercy that he cringes at the rebuke, and beseeches him for the sake of his companions in misery. But he gets this answer: "Were it not that I regard the presence of Jehoshaphat the king of Judah, I would not look toward thee, nor see thee." And then the prophet, as if too much irritated by having anything to do with this ignominious burlesque of a theocratic ruler, calls for a minstrel to soothe his perturbed spirit, and prepare him for seeking a sign from heaven. He was "a good hater," this man of God; or he would not have been fit for his work.

Here is another encounter, in which there is mutual indignation. When the famine was raging in Samaria, and the king was walking upon the city wall, a woman came to him with a tale of nameless horror. "I and another woman," she said, "agreed each to boil her son, that he should be eaten. I have done this with mine, and now she is hiding hers." The horror-stricken monarch exclaims, "God do so and more also to me, if the head of Elisha the son of Shaphat shall stand on him this day." Here is Jehoram the son of Ahab to the life; an impulsive man, not without generosity, but without self-control, and without perception of the real bearings of things. He at once despatches an official with orders to execute *summary justice* on the public enemy. Elisha, sitting

with the elders in his house, says to them, "See ye how this son of a murderer hath sent to take away mine head?" Presently, however, the affair takes a new turn. The king's paroxysm subsides; and the prophet does not lose his head.

This passionate king we see rending his clothes on more than one occasion. Hapless man! he will not look at the truth, namely, that not Elisha but he, with his perverse idolatry, is the plague of the land. He is aghast at this horrible famine. How does he account for it? Why, it is all the fault of that atrocious Elisha. It is Ahab denouncing Elijah again. "Art thou he that troubleth Israel?" So the blind son follows the blind father; both wilfully blind, self-bereft of all sound vision, believing a lie, which is the frightful penalty of all perseverance in evil ways; both hurrying, with strong delusion, to the ruin which is the only possible end of denying a righteous God. This man's life ends literally like his father's. "Jehu drew a bow with his full strength, and smote Jehoram between his arms, and the arrow went out at his heart, and he sunk down in his chariot."

Then comes in the new dynasty, concerning which Elisha surely cannot be very sanguine. Yet there is some hope that, with a new race of rulers, the falsehood which has been eating away the nation's vitals may be driven out, that it may not even now be all too late for the return of truth and health, so that iniquity may not be Israel's ruin. For with a

nation as with a man, the long-suffering of God is, in its divine idea and intent, salvation. The world soon gives a man up when once it sees him on the downward road. Not so God. Every bad life, that has to work its evil way through all manner of divine restraints, is a microcosm of that strange mournful history of Israel. We are now at a crisis of that history. God has raised up two great physicians to grapple with the disease which has prostrated the nation. There have been miracles of mercy and of judgment wrought in the midst of the Israelitish people, to recall them as no words could from their sensual idolatry and creeping superstition, to arouse faith in a righteous and a gracious God. Now at length that pestilent race of kings, who have pandered to all the degraded instincts of the people, is to vanish. Jehu, the exterminator, long since designated, even in the hearing of Elijah, as the sovereign-elect, is now anointed at Elisha's command, the inaugural address to the new monarch being such as this: "Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, I have anointed thee king over the people of the Lord, even over Israel. And thou shalt smite the house of Ahab thy master, that I may avenge the blood of my servants the prophets, and the blood of all the servants of the Lord, at the hand of Jezebel. For the whole house of Ahab shall perish." The rough soldier's face glows at the congenial message, and his heart is hot within him. Appointed a scourge of God, he magnifies his office. He has a sense of

right and wrong in him, and an abounding energy that wants work of the kind. Jehu drives furiously on his exterminating errand, until he has massacred the whole family of Ahab and all the worshippers of Baal. Two kings he smites in their chariots. He drives over Jezebel's corpse. He compels the princes of Samaria to murder the seventy royal children, and then orders them to lay the heads of the victims in two heaps at his palace-gate. Which having been done, he indulges in savage irony while, with evident pleasure, he surveys those two heaps of horrors. From Jezreel to Samaria, he drives again furiously; slaughtering a whole company of men whom he met by the way, friends of the fallen house; taking up into his chariot an acquaintance to whom he says, "Come with me, and see my zeal for the Lord"; and at the journey's end destroying every living soul of the house of Ahab, till there was not one left. Then comes the crowning act of this "Scourge of God." He gets the whole priesthood of Baal assembled by a stratagem in their great temple; and there he smites them every one with the edge of the sword. "Thus Jehu destroyed Baal out of Israel." He is "a tameless tiger hungering for blood;" and yet the history dares to represent the Lord saying unto Jehu, "Thou hast done well in executing that which is right in mine eyes, and hast done unto the house of Ahab according to all that was in mine heart."

To the regret of some readers of the Bible, and

the delight of others. Tender-hearted Christianity may well weep over such pages, and turn her eyes away from them; but only maudlin or very ignorant Christianity will wish them out of the Bible or feel afraid they are a disgrace to it. The "higher criticism," which is far above shuddering at the indentification of such atrocities with any divine sanction whatsoever, but only smiles at it, is a priggish thing, which cannot possibly be so wise as it looks. Questions like these are not contained in nutshells; are not so easily disposed of as the "higher criticism" would have us believe. "Behold, God is great, and we know Him not. Lo, these are parts of His ways." The dictum of an American philosopher is not without some application to the point: "Consistency is the fool's hobgoblin." We are not greatly concerned about "Harmonies" of the Bible, chronological or otherwise; but when we look at its persistent assertion of the moral perfection of God and its persistent assertion of God's approval of acts like those of Jehu, we are impressed with its really wonderful fearlessness in placing side by side with each other such apparently incongruous doctrines, and we cannot help suspecting that there must be some great meaning involved in the paradox. We are perpetually driven to our only explanation, as this one problem or paradox confronts us through book after book of the Scriptures; and as we again and again recur to it, our conviction deepens *that this our only explanation is all-sufficing—this,*

namely, of the vehemence and severity of God's love to man, as being proportionate to its intensity and its tenderness. "For our God is a consuming fire:" not "out of Christ," as well-meaning people would sometimes grievously spoil those apostolic words; for the Bible knows nothing of the antithesis, God out of Christ, and in Christ: it knows nothing of a metaphysical Deity. Everywhere in Scripture God is a Being of intense and often wrathful love; but nowhere so intensely loving, in all the dreadful as well as delightful aspects of love, as in the crucified Christ. It is pre-eminently in the Incarnate Redeemer that God shows Himself "a consuming fire."

"But Jehu took no heed to walk in the law of the Lord God of Israel with all his heart." He proved a mere destructive. Perhaps a much better man than he would have been quite as powerless to arrest the downward course of Israel. Whatever hopes Elisha may have centred in him, must have gone to the ground long before the twenty-eight years of Jehu's reign had worn themselves out. The doomed nation goes its way. The shadows of captivity and of extinction are already upon it. "In those days the Lord began to cut Israel short: and Hazael smote them in all the coasts of Israel." The new dynasty has done its work and exhausted itself, seemingly, in destroying the old one. For constructive purposes, it seems useless. Jehu himself does nothing decisive in the way of religious

reformation ; nor does Jehoahaz, the son of Jehu ; nor does Joash, the grandson of Jehu, the man whom we find weeping at the bedside of the dying prophet. None of them seems to have had much to do with Elisha ; and concerning each of them it is written, with doleful iteration, " He followed the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which made Israel to sin."

The closing scene of Elisha's life is profoundly interesting, for showing how the glorious old man labours, even when dying, to kindle in the heart of the king a faith as enthusiastic as his own. It shows that this Joash is not altogether faithless. His mere presence indicates this, and still more his conduct. It is likely he has not often seen the prophet till now. Perhaps no miracle, nor any striking sign of Elisha's heavenly mission, has appeared in his reign or life-time. But for all that, the very name of Elisha must have retained an almost magical power ; and especially with this king, Jehu's grandson, who could not forget who had placed his grandfather on the throne. With a strange feeling Joash must have heard that the old prophet was dying. Real reverence and real sorrow prompted those tears which he shed on going into the room. Real faith, too, spoke out in that lamentation of his, in which he perhaps intentionally repeated the very words in which Elisha had apostrophised the departing Elijah more than *half a century* before. " O my father, my father,

the chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof." Whereupon follows a transaction that is very surprising to witness in a death-room. The aged prophet knows well what a crisis it is for his dear country, and how "faith waxes fainter on the earth." He feels one last mighty impulse to strengthen the king's tremulous confidence in Jehovah. He girds himself for a last effort. Now he will give the monarch of Israel a sign. It is only a sign of military success, to be sure ; but, in these days, it is the sort of sign that is wanted. He tells his royal visitor to take bow and arrows ; to put his hand on the bow ; to open the window eastward ; and then, laying his own trembling hands on the king's hands, he tells him to shoot. The arrow flies, and Elisha exclaims, "The arrow of the Lord's deliverance ! Thou shalt smite the Syrians, till thou have consumed them." To find fault with the warlike spirit of this charge from the lips of a dying man, is not only to forget what Israel's real exigency was at that crisis ; it is to shut one's eyes to a signal display of heroism ; for such it was, in a man dying at ninety years of age. Then he required the king to appropriate the promise by an act of his own. He was to take the remaining arrows, and strike the ground with them one after another. He began ; but at the third arrow he stayed. Unlike the woman with her cruse of oil, he left off too soon. "And the man of God was wroth with him, and said, Thou

shouldest have smitten five or six times, whereas now thou shalt smite Syria but thrice." We can fancy the king somewhat reluctantly obeying the strange orders up to that point, and then, with an impatient or a contemptuous gesture, as if his half-hearted faith could hold out no longer, refusing to go on with the ceremony; ashamed, perhaps, of pinning his faith to this poor dying old man, or annoyed at the old man's quiet assumption of superiority. And we can well understand Elisha's wrath at witnessing the king's indecision. Too plainly he saw that this was not a man "having an understanding of the times, and knowing what Israel ought to do." And it grieved him to the heart. This is our last glimpse of him. His life thus closes with a memorable testimony that faith should be thorough.

"It ever was my way, and shall be still,
When I do trust a man, to trust him wholly."

That was Elisha's way of trusting God.

And so we see him leaving the world, a contrast to Elijah! We see him, in these last moments, haggard with sickness and with age, prostrate under the stroke of death. And yet the immense vigour of his spirit and the conquering strength of his faith do not seem to have suffered any abatement. No fiery chariots and horses are come to take *him* away, but feebleness and disease, wrinkled old age, and pale death. He departs *amid* no blaze of the opened heavens, but by the

dark road in which light after light goes out, and stage after stage of lethargy is past ; thus Elisha goes down into that valley of humiliation, "the way of all the earth." And yet Elijah's exit itself was not more grand. It was a contrast only in seeming ; and as we think of the emaciated corpse of Elisha lying on the bed there, soon to be buried, we feel, " Things are not what they seem."

But we have not yet heard the last of him ; and when we do, it certainly eclipses in its wonderfulness the last that we have heard of Elijah. For neither the death nor the burial is to be the " last scene of all, that ends the strange eventful history." There is to be a miracle in the sepulchre, a posthumous reiteration of the message that he had given as a living man, a most astonishing *vox clamantis* in the very grave. That emaciated corpse is to become a wonder and a sign to Israel. In a quite matchless way Elisha, being dead, will yet speak ; matchless, except in such mediæval tales as those of St. Francis, whose corpse works miracles promiscuously on its way through crowds of people to the place of interment. Our history, it should be observed, although it is the richest seam of supernaturalism in the Bible, makes no approach to that affluence of miracles peculiar to the Middle Ages. And on any hypothesis except that of the matter-of-fact truthfulness of the story of Elisha, it is surprising that the compilers of these records did not indulge in marvels and prodigies far more

freely than they did. Considering that we have so many, we may well wonder that we have so few, and those few so significant and, at any rate if we except the ursine tragedy, so free from all traces of random exaggeration. We venture to speak thus, even as there rises up before us that miracle in the sepulchre which may strike some as the hardest of credence in the whole Bible. This is the story as we have it. "And it came to pass, as they were burying a man, that, behold, they spied a band of men; and they cast the man into the sepulchre of Elisha; and when the man was let down, and touched the bones of Elisha, he revived, and stood up on his feet." The account is brief, but explicit enough for us to see quite clearly what is alleged to have happened. A man dies in the neighbourhood in which Elisha has been buried. They are carrying this man to the grave, when the funeral procession is startled at the sight of a band of brigands. These are some of the marauding Moabites, who, since the "coming in of the year," have been troubling this unhappy land of Israel in the same way that the Syrians have so often done. A party of them is now prowling in these parts, and the people who are engaged in burying the dead man spy the foe just as they arrive on the burial-ground. The sepulchre of Elisha happens to be close at hand at the moment; and the frightened people, with all *haste*, open it and thrust the body into it. Now it

must be borne in mind that the Israelites did not bury their dead in coffins covered with earth ; but, as a rule, merely wrapped them in folds of linen cloth, and laid them in sepulchres dug in the ground or excavated in the solid rock. Hence we can see how, without any forethought of such an occurrence, but from sheer haste, the one corpse might be brought into contact with the other. But as for the sudden resuscitation of the dead man, when he touched the bones of Elisha, we may pronounce the story wonderful indeed if true, but equally wonderful if false. If we merely think of the circumstances, at once so singular and so clearly defined, we are impressed with the verisimilitude, and find a difficulty in conceiving it a pure fabrication. Still more difficult is it to take the explanation of the myth-mongers, that the man was supposed to be dead, and, when cast into Elisha's grave, "was brought to his senses and restored to animation by the rough shock of the severe fall." Such a "fortuitous concurrence" of improbabilities may commend itself to rationalism, but not, surely, to reason. We cheerfully take our place among the "ignorant systematic apologists," who think they see a good if not an all-sufficient reason for believing in this marvel in the mere fact of its being in the Bible, in the great Book which teems with miracles and throbs with supernatural life throughout, with Christ for the mighty heart and all-informing soul of it. And we accept it, too,

as something that speaks for itself and stands on its own merit, and is thoroughly worthy of this Bible. It is by no means a case of *credo quia incredibile*. The symbolic sense of this appendix to the story of Elisha is really striking in its fitness and in its force. It was not Elisha's corpse, but Elisha's God, that revived the dead man; yet the marvellous revival was associated with the memory of the departed prophet, nay, more, with the very fact of his being dead and buried; and thus it was proclaimed, in the most impressive and effective mode that was practicable in those dark days, and with a voice that is worth listening to in these days, that although the man of God was dead and buried, God lived on, with all His undiminished redeeming strength.

With this thought we close our review of the great prophet's history. Great he is, though not the greatest, and worthy of an attentive hearing to the end of time. A man of the grandest simplicity of purpose, whose personality is lost in his mission, like him who long afterwards came "in the spirit and power of Elias." "A voice crying in the wilderness," a voice that still cries aloud, in a faithless world, asserting the presence of the everlasting God. And he, who in his lifetime was seen pointing to Moses, may now be seen pointing to Jesus, to our infinitely greater Prophet, who died, who rose again from the dead, who is God *with us*. That miracle in the sepulchre prefigured

the central truth of our faith and hope. As instantaneously as the dead man revived at his contact with the corpse of the prophet, a dead soul starts into new life at feeling the touch of the crucified Lord. Only not by contact with the dead body, but with the ever-living sacrifice, of Jesus Christ, we pass from death to life.

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